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## An Intertext between Environmental Degradation and Exploitation of a Woman in Mahasweta Devi's *The Hunt*<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract:**

Mahasweta Devi, a famous creative writer and a politically- charged social activist has dedicated her fictional works and grassroots activism to the cause of the welfare of dispossessed adivasis in India. Although Devi clearly denied to be tagged as a feminist, her poignant narratives certainly portray the exploitation and devaluation of subaltern women in India. Alongside, Devi's narratives also document her concern for the disruption and destruction of nature and its resources by capitalist businessmen. Devi with her pen, dipped in concern for the preservation of the purity of nature and women, questions the development process that disturbs ecological balance and devaluates women as an object for the fulfilment of carnal desire. Thereby, many of her narratives are certainly ecofeminist in nature in their presentation of the exploitation and domination of women and of nature going hand in hand in the marginalized tribal communities in India. The present paper attempts an ecofeminist study of Mahasweta Devi's "The Hunt" and endeavours to bring to the fore the twin exploitation of nature and women with a hint of resistance against such maltreatment towards the closure of the story.

### **Keywords: Ecofeminism, Nature, Women, Exploitation, Adivasi, Resistance**

"The patriarchal world view sees man as the measure of all value, with no space for diversity, only for hierarchy. Woman, being different, is treated as unequal and inferior." (Shiva 164)

Random and reckless industrialization and commercialization in recent years have resulted in thoughtless exploitation of nature and its precious resources. In the great name of development and progression, nature with all its benevolent resources has been subjected to merciless plundering with the consequence of the disruption of ecological symmetry and symbiosis. Without any concern for environment and its ability to endure the incessant attacks the lustful tycoons have been plundering natural resources exclusively to their personal interest. Although several govt. and non-govt. organizations have been holding campaigns and movements, organising seminars and conferences for the survival of greens, the money- minded businessmen are hardly paying any heed to their supplication. Even in some cases the govt. officials are found to be involved as accomplices in this relentless invasion against environment. Although many natural calamities all over the world lately have threatened human civilization because of men's callous and commercial treatment of nature, they don't yet recognise or rather don't want to recognise that it is their irresponsible misdeed that Nature is avenging on. They are just engrossed in their material hunting without the least consideration for environmental equipoise. The moral considerations about cosmic proportion like that of Coleridge expressed towards the end of his seminal work "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner": "He prayeth best, who loveth best/ All things both great and small: / For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all" seems to remain a mere

suggestion in pen and paper (Coleridge VII. ll. 614-617). The modern men who are in endless pursuit of material pleasures are not at all bothered to execute all these 'obsolete' morals.

Alongside the despoliation of the naturalness of nature, has been running on the exploitation of women and their devaluation as passive commercialised objects. In traditional mythologies women had generally been identified with nature. Their individuality and personal identity had very subtly been neglected by the discourses of patriarchy by associating them very skilfully with nature, goddess and nation. Although some ecofeminists consider this hegemonic association of women with nature as a source of oppression on and devaluation of women's unique womanly qualities, the other group of ecofeminists regard this imposed connection between nature and women as a ground of empowerment for women. Women, as some ecofeminists believe, have a distinguished relationship with nature because of some of their identical qualities which, to some extent at least, endow them with a powerful agency. But with the advancement of urbanization and globalization women's special relationship with nature has been very exquisitely and systematically cropped under the continual invasion of science and technology which are censured by Vandana Shiva, the most powerful voice of ecofeminism in India, as colonial and patriarchal<sup>2</sup>. Truly speaking, they are no more the 'Goddess', the 'Mother' or the 'Nation'. They rather just have become an object to be used for the fulfilment of masculine sexual desires. The myth of development has very delicately naturalized the marginalization and ill-treatment of both women and environment under the grand mask of 'development'. So, in the present world the dividing line between anthropocentrism and androcentrism has become dissolved and their togetherness has ultimately resulted in the emergence of a particular class of people who are popularly designated as "Capitalist Patriarchy"<sup>3</sup>. And the ecofeminists' struggle is against this particular class of people whose only concern is material gain even at the cost of ecological crisis and dehumanized treatment of women. Ecofeminism as a sub-type of feminism is an interdisciplinary movement that attempts to demonstrate the parallel victimization of women and nature with a remonstrance against the politics that normalise such exploitation and inferiorization. I am not getting into the details of this postcolonial theory. However, to set the premise of my discussion, the definition enunciated by Birkeland is, I think, enough to have a basic understanding of the theory: Ecofeminism is, as Birkeland defined "a value system, a social movement, and a practice... (which) offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental degradation." (Birkeland 18)

In India this very twin violence is perhaps most clearly discernible in the un (der) developed adivasi areas where the mainstream capitalists trespass demolishing the sanctity of both nature and women by using both of them as commodified objects for monetary profit. The denizens of the "Fourth World" as designated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are, no doubt, the victims of neo-colonialism as they were in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. They have been marginalized, devalued even as part of humanity in the name of caste and class and even of place. As they are perpetually-colonised people, nature has some special value to them as they have to depend on natural objects for their livelihood. To quote Franz Fanon: "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity." (Fanon 9). However, when the world has been celebrating cybernetic development, the gradual invasion of 'development' and 'progression' threaten the geo-centric existence of the disprivileged adivasis in India. Mahasweta Devi rightly observes, "As long as the forests were there, the hunting tribes do not suffer so much, because the forests used to provide them with food, shelter, timber, and hunting. But now that the forests are gone, tribals are in dire distress." (Devi ii)<sup>4</sup>. And when the lustful businessmen intrude into the tribal areas for some mercantile purposes they fulfil their fleshly desires by victimising the innocent adivasi women. It cannot

at all be denied that in present India the domination of women and the exploitation of nature have been going hand in hand in the marginalized tribal communities in the name of 'development' projects.

Mahasweta Devi, an undaunted social activist and a veteran creative writer, has dedicated her fictional oeuvre to voicing the agony of all those dispossessed people who have been pauperized and neglected even as part of mankind. Through her activist works and creative writings she wants to give voice to those people who have perpetually been silenced by the interplay of several discourses. As a socially committed writer she always feels a kind of obligation to speak for the tribal have-nots. She herself once said: "I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty toward society." (ix). Indeed, the writer-activist took up her pen to champion the cause of the disregarded tribals in India. In her writings, whether creative or journalistic, she represents the fates of the Indian subalterns undergoing endless miseries. Her writings are the portrayal of the horrific tales of tribal women forcibly (mis) used by the mainstream outsiders. And in this tales of horrific realities she is equally vocal about the issues of plundering of natural resources very much interconnected with the ill-treatment of women in adivasi communities. Her powerful narratives of exploitation and resistance are product of her genuine commitment to use her writings as a powerful weapon to bring to the surface the manifold machinations of exploitation that have been constantly in work in tribal areas in India. She herself said in an interview: "The sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies... My experience keeps me perpetually angry and makes me ruthlessly unforgiving towards the exploiters, or the exploiting system. That the mainstream remains totally oblivious of the tribal situation furthers that burning anger... [I] believe in anger, in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government, to expose its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation; and place this India, a hydra-headed monster, before a people's court, the people being the oppressed millions." (Devi ix-x). This unequivocal declaration is, I suppose, clarifies the motive force of Devi's life and works.

Mahasweta Devi's "Shikar" translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as "The Hunt" and included in the collection *Imaginary Maps* is, indeed a poignant narrative of the twin exploitation of nature and women. The story clearly presents a picture of the destruction of natural resources and domination of a tribal woman running parallel in undeveloped tribal areas like Kuruda in India. It is a story of domination and oppression meted out to a woman and trees by a mainstream harbinger of developmentalism. Here, Mahasweta Devi, in her typical bold manner displays the sufferings of a quasi-subaltern woman Mary Oraon subjected to sexual harassment and manipulation by Tehsildar Singh who carries the rippling flag of mainstream in the story. Tehsildar's main purpose to visit Kuruda, an undeveloped adivasi village, is, however, to make some monetary profit by the reckless practice of relentless deforestation. But immediately after his arrival there, this anthropocentric purpose becomes entwined with an androcentric one and Mary Oraon, a subaltern woman, becomes the target of Tehsildar's lascivious desires. The manipulation of a tribal woman and the destruction of Sal forest here become a sort of rhetoric of that politics of discrimination that supports and sustains the stereotypical binaries between nature-culture and man-woman, that have been designed and maintained by the "bourgeois-nationalist elitism" at the cost of the relentless revilement of the dispossessed Other (Guha 1). However, with the revengeful murder of Tehsildar Singh by Mary towards the end of the story, "The Hunt" becomes a manifestation of Devi's "resistant aesthetics" in its voice against gender oppression and annihilation of the physical environment in postcolonial India (Gupta 120).



Mahasweta Devi is more a humanist than a feminist. Her narratives go beyond any rigid specification as any such designation, she herself feels, would demarcate the contours of her devoted works for human civilization as a whole. She herself has asserted once: "I never consider myself as a woman writer, a feminist. Nothing. I am a writer and when I write I write of such people who live much below the poverty lines. They are men, women and children. I don't isolate the woman" (Collu 146). It is indeed impossible to determine the borders of Devi's reality-rooted fictional enterprise. Yet, in her writings she has always advocated for the abolition of the system that is responsible for the subjugation of women as the inferior other. Moreover, she has created many exceptionally powerful women characters like Dopdi in "Draupadi", Dhowli in "Dhowli", or Mary Oraon in our present concern "The Hunt", whose defence against patriarchal dominance renders an obvious feminist dimension to her works. Devi's "The Hunt" is a powerful narrative of a subaltern woman Mary Oraon who is victim of phallogocentric sexual aggression and her retaliation over the man who threatened her maidenhood. In her case, the patriarchal machinations are in work even from before her birth. Mary is a born-'other'. She is an illegitimate child whose birth is the result of some voluptuous desires of an Australian colonial master. As she is the daughter of an Australian father and an aboriginal adivasi mother her genealogy clearly suggests her hyphenated identity. Because of this hybridism, she is not even normally accepted in her own community. She is, in a sense, dishoused in her own home. Mahasweta Devi is here critical of intra-caste polarization that is in effect in the otherness of Mary. Tehsildar Singh, the mainstream imperialistic businessman, becomes crazy to assert his gender superiority by 'winning' Mary who becomes a victim of the lustful desires of that "big beast" (15). To prove the domineering power of his 'manhood' he continuously teases her with the target of deflowering her. That is why even though he "has a wife and children...Tehsildar still lusts after women...."(11). To the lustful eyes of the capitalists like Tehsildar, women like Mary are just the objects to be desired and deflowered.

In the presentation of Mary, Devi has not only portrayed her exploitation by a capitalist outsider. Following the line of Mahasweta Devi's "resistance aesthetics", the story also presents Mary's withstand against Tehsildar's advancement (Gupta 120). As per the adivasi ritual of 'Jani Parab', Mary finally undertakes the role of a hunter to perform the "biggest kill" and celebrates his agency by singing and dancing almost frantically (16). It is really noteworthy that the subaltern female victim is here endowed with an exceptional power, both physical and mental, to put an end to her consistent manipulation by killing Tehsildar, "a Lakra, a wolf." (xi). From an object of hunting Mary finally turns out to be a victorious hunter: "Today all the mundane blood-conditioned fears of the wild quadruped are gone because she has killed the biggest beast." (17). To an adivasi woman like Mary, a beast like Tehsildar is, indeed, more dangerous than a real beast. Thus as a rhetoric of resistance "The Hunt" becomes a narrative of resistance by giving, to quote Simone de Beauvoir, "the second sex" an 'abnormal' masculine power to stand against a capitalist exploiter.

It is really noteworthy that in "The Hunt" Devi does not delimit her attack against the patriarchal exploitation of a woman. In a very clear and trenchant manner she also portrays the attack on nature through illegal deforestation. The forest here becomes "a site of resource extraction." (Wenzel 141). The destruction of the Sal forests for commercial purposes represents the violation of ecological symbiosis. Moreover, it also results in the disruption of the tribal way of life because, as mentioned earlier, the tribals have to depend on the blessings of nature for their livelihood. Tehsildar Singh in the story is a representative of "bourgeois-nationalist elitism" (Guha 1). And as a dutiful representative he spares no time to rob nature of its immaculate naturalness for mercantile profit: "He stuck to Mary through marking and felling the trees, cutting and transporting them." (10). As an efficient businessman he tricked

the illiterate villagers to substantiate his dominion over the local tribals by splitting tactfully the close interrelation of local economies and ecologies. He is a rapist in the truest sense of the term, first in his attempt to deflower Mary and secondly in his avarice for natural resources<sup>5</sup>. As Mahasweta Devi tells in “Author in Conversation” in *Imaginary Maps*: “Tehsildar Singh represents the mainstream. He is a contractor, the entire administration is behind him, because this illegal deforestation, which continues all over India is done with great skill, and always the tribals are condemned....So that the hands that fell the trees are not the hands responsible for the deforestation all over India.” (xii). So, the exploitation presented in the story is discernible not only within man-woman and mainstream-other hegemonic opposites; the story also obliquely criticizes the neo-colonial capitalist forces plundering nature without any consideration of its aftermath. And it is Tehsildar Singh who represents the misogynist capitalists in the story: “He thought, the business of felling trees in this forest is most profitable. Mary can make his stay profitable in the other sense as well.” (8).

Thus in “The Hunt” Mahasweta Devi has narrated an event that is true of India today. The exploitation of underclass women has been running parallel with the degradation of physical environment in tribal areas in India. It actually originates from profit-centric ‘development’ projects designed and controlled by the mainstream consumerist planners. Devi’s displeasure with the breakdown of ecological sanctity and sustainability is clearly reflected here: “Once there were animals in the forest, life was 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). Again, Devi’s concernment for the marginalized state of women in ‘independent’ India is also true. Although in theories and papers there are continuous advocacy for the freedom and equal rights of women with men, it cannot at all be denied that the scenario has not changed much for women in India, at least for the adivasi women. Actually, through her presentation of the aforementioned twin domination, Mahasweta Devi argues and advocates for a kind of sustainable development that will be, to quote a very popular cliché, “of the people, by the people and for the people”, of course, taking into consideration the maintenance of the ecological sanctity and the conservation of natural equipoise. Actually Devi’s presentation of the twin exploitation of the women and nature in “The Hunt” is a product of her social concern and her sense of responsibility as a writer to voice the sufferings of the exploited reflecting her own stance as a writer: “A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defence of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him...” (Devi viii).

### Notes and References:

1. For this idea I am indebted to Vandana Gupta’s *Mahasweta Devi: A Critical Reading*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2009. P. 34. Print.
2. For this idea I acknowledge my indebtedness to Manisha Rao’s essay “Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review”. *DEP*. n.20/ 2012. 129. [http://www.unive.it/media/allegato/dep/n20-2012/Ricerche/Casi/11\\_Rao\\_Ecofeminism.pdf](http://www.unive.it/media/allegato/dep/n20-2012/Ricerche/Casi/11_Rao_Ecofeminism.pdf). Web. 12 Feb. 2015
3. The phrase “Capitalist Patriarchy” is taken from the title of the book *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein. New York and London: Monthly Review Press. 1978. Print.
4. All subsequent references to the book *Imaginary Maps*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Thema, 1995 are indicated with page numbers in parenthesis.

5. The idea is taken from: Sarkar, Sushil. "Environment and Woman: Reflections on Exploitation through Eco-Feminism in Mahasweta Devi's Imaginary Maps." *Research Chronicer: A peer-reviewed refereed and indexed international multidisciplinary research journal*.1.2 (2013). 147. <http://www.research-chronicer.com/pdf/v2/1217.pdf>. Web. 09 Feb. 2015.

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