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Eco- sensibility of Women Writers: A Study on Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

Sufina. K

Research Scholar
School of Social Sciences and Languages
English Division
VIT University Chennai Campus
Chennai-600127
India.

&

Dr. Bhuvaneswari R

Assistant Professor
School of Social Sciences and Languages
English Division
VIT University Chennai Campus
Chennai-600127
India.

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Abstract:

In the contemporary literary approach, ecocriticism fosters ecocentric view to the readers. Women writers and critics also play an equal role in the development of ecocriticism. Even the phases of ecocriticism are construed with the description of the phases of feminism. The patriarchal oppression towards women and nature has resulted in the emergence of women's voice for nature. The women writers pen about environmentalism and break the delusion that their writings focus on sufferings of female in the patricentric society. The predominant nature of human urges to categorize a part of their own species as marginalized tribes. The process of development is a threat to the livelihood of tribes and their rapport with nature is disturbed. Literature has its role in expounding justice for the tribes. Mahasweta Devi, a well-known female Indian writer and activist has voiced for the silenced nature and tribes. The paper analyses Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* to highlight oneness of tribes with nature and focuses on the eco-sensibility of women writers.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Tribes, Women, eco-justice, hierarchy.

Introduction

The description of ecocriticism looks simple when Glotfelty defines it as "the study of relationship between environment and literature" (xviii), but the strength of the bondage matters. The awareness about human-nature relationship and the shifting from egocentrism to ecocentrism are the core ideology of ecocritical movement. Ecocriticism is "a new variety of critical thinking which opposes the blasé attitude toward the natural world predominant in literary studies." (578), says Philips, who urges the readers to think

about the contributions that can be made to the environmentalism, instead of sitting on the couch and read the romances of nature. It is interesting to see that notable numbers of women augment to ecocriticism by taking the role of writers and critics. The motives of the women ecocritics are to voice for the muted tribes and to protect nature. "... violence against the natural world has its origins in human social and economic institutions based on oppressive systems of hierarchy and élitism." (Clark 89) The irrationalities in the hegemony which results in the oppression of women, nature and tribes are critiqued by female writers. Bookchin strongly views that "these ecological problems cannot be understood, let alone solved, without a careful understanding of our existing society and the irrationalities that dominate it." (19) Indian women writers set their works in support of the social ecological view where they advocate against the entire dominant hierarchical social order.

Eco-sensibility among Women

Discussing about women writers and ecocriticism does not mean that the paper is all about ecofeminism, where the term 'ecofeminism' itself showcases a hedge in society. The term ecofeminism presses the binary feminine—masculine attitude. So, it is inappropriate to use the term ecofeminism in the paper, as the study aims on clearing the hierarchical structure in a society and to ensure the rapport among all beings (includes non-human nature) is healthy devoid of class, caste, creed and hierarchy of man- woman- low class human- useful crops- animals- wilderness and its habitats in order to make a harmonious society. The meaning of hierarchy and "patricentricity" (6) and what it really serves is deeply discussed by Bookchin. "Male dominance becomes extremely active and ultimately yields a world in which male elites dominate not only women but also, in the form of classes, other men" (35) The patriarchal dominance go in higher rate as women try to question it by sharing their views through writing because it is a powerful weapon and many women writers handle it efficiently. Women writers break the cliché that they write about their wailing over their own suffering and claim for their identity and equality by penning down their view that the dominant eye on nature should be shifted.

In the patriarchal society, women find it hard to express their views freely and they are directly or indirectly oppressed. The subjugation undergone by the 'weaker sex' makes them to advocate for the exploited nature. Nature writing is considered as a literary genre in the second phase of ecocriticism, and during this phase, Rachel Carson is one of the female writers widely noted by the ecocritics and readers. It is evident from the lines, "The environmental movement begun in the 1960s with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*." (Brizee) The phases of ecocriticism is itself modeled with the view of phases of feminism as Glotfelty says, "I suggested that Elaine Showalter's model of the three developmental stages of feminist criticism might provide a useful scheme for cataloguing three analogous efforts in ecocriticism." (*A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism*)

In India, history of women's eco- sensibility can be seen right from early days, for instance, Amrita Devi of Khejarli village and other villagers have risked their life in protecting trees by hugging them which later emerges into a popular forest conservation

movement namely 'Chipko Movement'. Gaura Devi is another woman who has led her villagers to exemplify Chipko movement in the year of 1974. Even in Indian literature, "Many Indian novelists not only explore female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society, but their works also retain currency for making social issues a key part in their novels."(Chanda 2) Kamala Markandaya, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak advocate nature and ecology in their writings. With different genres and style of writings, the above mentioned writers stir ecoconsciousness among readers. Mahasweta Devi, a social activist and writer has campaigned in favour of tribes and forest, despite the evils of colonization on one hand and women behavioral taboos on the other hand. The fiction *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* by Mahasweta Devi is a best instance to ensure the fact that the writings of women concentrate on promulgating the truth behind the successful patriarchal society. Her writings try to break the hierarchical order of man, woman and nature respectively; it promotes the view that man is one among the inhabitants of ecology in this holistic Earth. Mahasweta Devi, the activist is admired for her efficiency in using language as weapon to help the tribes to get their rights from the government. Her works are the siren for driving out the evils that haunted the tribes; likewise they are the bridge between the humans outside and the souls inside the forest. Despite the threats she has confronted, she has lived for the tribes till her last day in this world.

Tribal Oneness with Nature

In the hierarchical order, the alleged 'civilized' male-human is in the top followed by female-human and nature at the base. This anthropocentric attitude of so called civilized human being is a threat to the holism of nature. The predominant nature of the humans urge them to categorize a part of their own species as marginalized tribes who are different from 'superior human' owing to caste, religion, education and most importantly their rapport with nature. Plumwood refers tribes as animalized human as they find no difference between themselves and other beings, "the exploitation of animal (and animalized human) 'others' in the name of a 'human-reason-centered culture'" (qtd in Huggan and Tiffin 5). The word 'others' is stressed by Plumwood and so does Dona Haraway, when she tries to explain the evil of the societal order being followed for centuries,

"certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals- in short, domination of all *others*, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man."(35)

According to the list given by Haraway, the decisive problem is with the dualism of 'self/others' and the rest are its extension. The selfish attitude makes one to be greedy

enough to possess 'others'. The Munda tribes, the 'others', who are selfless, live in harmony with nature and make their living innocently deep inside the forest. The Munda adivasis plant and cultivate crops, hunt animals and equally get hurt by animals as "There's all kindsa animals in forest. Tiger, Cheetah, leopard, bear."(69) The portrayal of forest and its inhabitants is given by Devi through the words of Dhani Munda, thus he says to Chotti, "A lot of forest in those days. Hare-bear-deer-hedgehog-partridge-pigeon-no dearth of meat."(9) The tribes consider themselves as children of the forest as they worship it as their mother "... jungle our mother, Dhani said. Let me learn ye t' jungle, with jungle learnin' ye won' die starvin'. What isn't there in t' jungle?" (11) The very words of the elderly shaman Dhani are true and are proved during a drought in Chotti. The river Chotti dries due to dearth and the tribes think that they are going to die of hunger and thirst. But when the river is dug according to the advice of Chotti Munda, the river springs up water. And the blessing is greatly accepted by the Munda head, "Don' dirty this water with dirty clothes or baths, said Chotti. Precious water."(101)

The displacement is not only an issue of a group of under privileged people in the modern society, but it is also a threat to the forest ecology. The tribes try their best to maintain the ecological balance. A destroyed forest cannot be recovered just by planting hundreds of trees in wilderness as the forest ecology comprises of the habitats in that specific area which cannot be rebuilt in some other place, and it includes, tribes who are also a part of the ecology. The displacement of tribes alters the forest ecology. Even though the adivasis hunt animals, it is for their livelihood but not for pleasure or to export; besides they follow certain ethics in hunting too. "The tribals believed that just as man needs land, the land which has a soul needs man to take care of it when it is sick." (Sreelatha 176) They have their ethics in their living which is rarely followed even by the cultured human, for instance, the tribes won't kill female animals and birds; they think "T' fam'ly of life grows larger wit' girl animals, girl birds" (Devi 77). Shooting arrows is their sport and traditional game in every festival and fair. Chotti Munda is popularly known and respected for targeting and shooting arrows as the tribes and others think that he has some magical chant to use the arrows for hitting a target. Even then they won't set an animal as their target in the competition because they know that animals are of their own kind. The tribes sell hunted animals and by-products of nature in markets, equally they sell their own babies. The tribes practice fuel efficiency, as "they light hurricane lanterns rarely. Kerosene, ground oil is dear. Everyday lighting needs they still fulfill with lamps of Mahua fruit oil."(69) There is no way to sunder tribes from the forest ecosystem and it is because of this, the so-called refined human term them as 'marginalized' and 'animalized human' who are taken for granted as slaves for landlords. The green-eyed landlords are too fond of the fruitful earth as it is their key resource of wealth; on the other hand, the adivasis love their land they live in. Looking into nature as mere valuable wealth and objectifying nature for their self development by human of higher rank is to be checked. Despite its sterility, the tribes mend lands to be fertile by shedding their sweat, tears and blood. Still the fortune out of their hard work is looted by the landlords. Such a social set up is condemned by Mahasweta Devi, where

Chotti Munda and his Arrow is a piece from the wailing tribal stories registered by the woman activist.

Mahasweta Devi's Advocacy for Ecojustice

Arundhati Roy has given her view that “writers must sometimes take sides in protesting against flagrant social and/or environmental injustices need to be measured against the constitutive instabilities of her chosen (literary) form.” (Huggan and Tiffin 34) Mahasweta Devi exemplifies the words of Roy in almost all her works especially in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. The protagonist Chotti Munda represents the weedy tribes of India. There may be confusion that ecocriticism is a study of nature and not of tribes. Firstly, man must understand that he is one among nature, and the law of nature is equal to all beings. Social ecology strongly believes that the diversity in the society should not tear the unity of eco-holistic Earth. Secondly, the muted and suppressed tribes who consider themselves as fellow beings of nature and children of forests (“jungle our mother” (Devi 11) says Dhani.) are in need of environmental justice, and it is the responsibility of an ecocritic to voice for them.

In the movement of ecocriticism, the concept of ecojustice has been brought in to compel the need for human's responsibility over ecology along with social justice. Pedersen in his article *Ecojustice Ethics; a brief Overview* “... ‘eco-justice’ ethic...that holds together concerns for the natural world and for human life, that recognizes that devastation of the environment and economic injustice go hand in hand, and that affirms that environmental and human rights are indivisible”.(qtd in *Ecojustice now*, 2011) Devi has pen down the prejudices of civilized human on forests and tribes. To fulfill the vision of a third world nation, human tries to become wealthier to show that the nation is paving a path for a developed country. The truth is that progress is constructed on the burial ground of forest beings. Equality is missing due to the categorization of caste, religion, poverty, untouchability, education, political influence, etc. Ecojustice is crucial in such a scenario. Devi has engraved the life of Munda tribes, through which she prognosticate the need for ecojustice.

The poor Mundas live by tilling the land allotted by the government, which is less than an acre and is taken by the landlords in the name of bonded labourers; the production from the fields is also swindled by the landlords. Chotti is the one who gives awareness about the hardships faced due to the cunningness of landlords. Bharat Munda worries, “We sell greens all our lives, we dunno how it tastes” (Devi 91). To escape from the cruelty of the landlords and to fight against hunger and earning for leading a life, tribes fall in the traps of missionaries at the cost of their own identity.

People like Dhukia, who confront the cruel managers, are killed in the jail. In colonized India, the people who fight for freedom are known as freedom fighters and martyrs, while the tribes are called as criminals and brutes when they fight for their basic needs (not even for freedom). “Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian.”(96) Dikus

is the name given by adivasis to the Indian citizens. Even after Indian independence, the struggles of the tribes are endless. The forests are cleared in the name of development, animals are nowhere to be found and tribes are driven out of the jungle in the name of civilization. "They've shot 'em from jeeps and made t' tiger vanish...So I feel sad, that our grandkids'll come o' age at such a time, that we'll not be able ta show them somethin' and say, we've seen this too." (174) Chotti says the above lines in a helpless tone, and it is a prediction that the tribes are also on the verge of extinction. The struggles of tribes to meet their livelihood continue even today and the cruelty on them is growing stronger.

Conclusion

The very idea of the people about being in a society has to be changed to bring out a remedy for the struggles faced by tribes and other natural beings. Women writers in India try to bring out the hidden struggles and suffocation of nature in a developing nation and a third world nation like India. Mahasweta Devi has taken the role of a writer to bring out the struggles of adivasis and to divulge the evils that lead to the destruction of an ecosystem. The feminine qualities are no longer considered as weak. More the women are dominated, more they clamor for liberation, with literature as a tool in their hand. They try to break the conventional view that nature is a mere resource for the sophisticated living of human, so, women writers start writing about nature which is subjugated more than women in a patriarchal society. The advocacy for the minority tribes and muted nature proves that women are not to be cursed but to be praised. They have to be eulogized for their intention of breaking the hierarchical order built by the patriarchal society and to feed the ecocentric thoughts in the minds of people.

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