



## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## EXPLORING MAHASWETA DEVI'S *THE HUNT* THROUGH THE LENS OF ECOFEMINISM

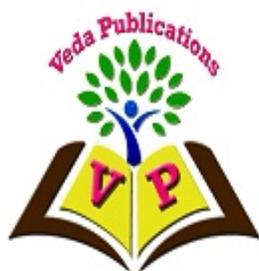
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### ABSTRACT



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The term 'Ecofeminism' has received critical recognition in the recent years throughout the globe. The term brings two critical thinkings—Ecocriticism and Feminism together. The concept of 'Ecofeminism' explores the connection between women and nature, and at the same time, it addresses the oppression of nature and women. Mahasweta Devi is a prominent literary figure in Indian Literature. She is a Bengali writer as well as a social activist. She has contributed a number of novels, short stories, and essays in the literary field. In her works, one can see her concern for the women, outcasts, and tribal people. She is concerned about those people who are exploited by the dominant groups. A number of issues prevalent in the society are well focused through her works. In her literary works, she has presented the ground realities of the oppressed people. Her deep concern for nature and the empowerment of women can be seen in her literary works. There is a close connection between nature and women. Both are easy prey to patriarchal society. In the name of development and civilization, both nature and women are exploited. Mahasweta Devi has not only experienced the struggling lives of the indigenous people, but at the same time tried to eradicate the exploitation these people were going through. In the present paper, the short story of Mahasweta Devi, *The Hunt* is discussed from the perspective of ecofeminism.

**Keywords:** *Ecofeminism, Women, Nature, Tribal People, Exploitation.*



## INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature. The French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne first coined the term in her book, *Le Feminisme Ou la Mort* in 1974. The term Ecofeminism brings two critical thinkings—Ecocriticism and Feminism together. The ecofeminist argues that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are the result of patriarchy and capitalism. For many years, scholars have explored the sentiment behind ecofeminism, and consequently, they have begun advocating for it. The prominent names associated with this movement are Vandana Shiva, the founder of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, and Carolyn Merchant, the author of *Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Some well-known Indian ecofeminist writers are Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandaya, Amitabh Ghosh, Mahasweta Devi etc. These writers have come forward and addressed the issues of the most oppressed groups of society, either ecology or feminism. In the present paper, the short story of Mahasweta Devi, *The Hunt* will be discussed from the perspective of Ecofeminism.

## DISCUSSION

Mahasweta Devi is a prominent literary figure in Indian Literature. She was a Bengali writer as well as a social activist. She has contributed a number of novels, short stories, and essays to Indian literature. She was awarded India's highest literary honour, the Jnanpith Award, in 1996. She had also received the Sahitya Akademi Award in Bengali. She was also awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997. She worked for the rights of tribal people. She had

received India's distinguished civilian award Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan. In her works, one can see her concern for women, outcasts, and tribal people. She is concerned for those people who are exploited by the dominant groups. Several issues prevalent in society are well-focused on through her works. As a social activist, Devi travelled to distant, remote places and experienced the harsh realities. She had not only experienced the struggling lives of the indigenous people, but at the same time tried to eradicate the exploitation of these people.

Mahasweta Devi was born on January 14, 1926 in the Bengal Presidency, British India, now in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Later, her parents moved to West Bengal after the partition of India. Her father, Manish Ghatak, was a well-known poet and novelist, and her mother, Dharitri Devi, was also a writer and social worker. She completed her B. A. in English from Visva-Bharati University, in Santiniketan, and completed her M.A. in English at Calcutta University. Her dedication and commitment to the exploited tribal women make her unique. In her literary works, she has presented the ground realities of the oppressed people. Her deep concern for nature and the empowerment of women can be seen in her works. There is a close connection between nature and women, both are easy prey to patriarchal society. In the name of development and civilization, both nature and women are exploited. In this connection, literature plays a significant role in protecting nature as well as women.

Mahasweta Devi always raised her voice against male dominance. In her novels like *The Book of the Hunter* (2002), *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2002), *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), and short stories like



*Draupadi, Shanichari, Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pritha, Dhouli, The Hunt*, etc., she has tried to portray the interconnection as well as interdependence of man and nature. In her writings, she has raised many issues related to women, like deprivation, exploitation of the underprivileged, and environmental degradation. Through her writings, she has tried to teach the oppressed to protest any kind of dominance. In her writings, the concern for the health of the earth as well as women can be clearly seen. One can find that her characters are closely associated with nature. The ecofeminist writers always try to preserve the natural environment by planting trees, nurturing different kinds of wild as well as domestic animals, digging wells and rivers, etc. Ecology has now become one of the prime discourses in the literary field. The ecofeminists are always concerned about the impending disaster of the Earth due to the exploitation of environment by human beings. Therefore, they always try to incorporate a sense of fellow feeling among the whole natural and human world.

*The Hunt* is a remarkable short story by Mahasweta Devi, which was published in an anthology called *Imaginary Maps* in 1995. The story was translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The protagonist of the story is Mary Oraon. Bhikni was her mother who was a tribal woman and her father, Dixon, was a white man. Mary was a very beautiful young girl of eighteen. She was a very hard-working girl who worked hard for her livelihood. She worked with her mother in Prasadji's bungalow. She managed all the household work of Prasadji. Mary had numbers of admirers at Tohri Market. But she

chose a Muslim boy called Jalim as her life partner.

The writer says:

"Mary has countless admirers at Tohri market. She gets down at the station like a queen. She sits in her own rightful place at the market. She gets smokes from the other marketeers, drinks tea and chews betel leaf at their expense, but encourages no one. Jalim, the leader of the marketeers and a sharp lad, is her lover. They will marry when either's savings reach a hundred rupees." (Devi 2)

The geographical location of the story is Gomo-Daltonganj line. (Devi 1) Once upon a time trains stopped at Kuruda. But now, it is an abandoned station. Now the station is in Tohri. The industrial exploitation of tribal people is seen in the second part of the story. Kuruda is a place where Sal trees were planted by the Britishers. The commercial values of the Sal trees were not known to the tribal people as they worship nature. Mahasweta Devi mentions in a conversation with the translator Gayatri Spivak about the outlook of the tribal people regarding nature:

"...just like the Native Americans, they also believed that the land and forest and river belong to everyone.....They understood ecology and the environment in a way we cannot yet imagine-the Sobors (the hunting tribes) will beg



forgiveness if they are forced to fell a tree. Before they killed an animal, they used to pray to the animal: the bird, the fish, the deer." (Devi x).

On the other hand, the Britishers knew that the Sal trees were valuable for economic profit. That is why, the British brought the railway track into the hill areas. Businessmen from the cities came to these areas and made profits by cutting and selling the Sal trees. Dixon, the Australian white man, came to this place, Kuruda and got benefitted from the timber business. Dixon even exploited the woman, Bhikni. Later, he sold his house and his forests and everything and left Bhikni alone and went back to Australia.

Another character in the story is Tehsildar Singh. He was a contractor who also exploited the Sal trees as well as the people of that land. He hired the tribal people to fell the Sal trees. On entering the forest, the greedy Tehsildar saw the valuable Sal trees and decided----"Every five years or so some trees will be ready and I'll buy. One two three. This is still a virgin area, and I'll take the tree felling monopoly" (Devi 6). Even after having a look at Mary, he estimated her just an object and thought within himself, "Wow! What a dish! In these woods?" (Devi 8) After that Tehsildar tried to make intimacy with Mary but got rejected. And finally, he attempted to rape her. (Devi 12). But somehow, she escaped. After the incident, Mary did not sit idle. She planned to take revenge upon her exploiter. So, she invited Tehsildar Singh on the day of Jani Parab--- a festival of tribal women where they took part in hunting. Mahasweta Devi said to Gayatri Spivak:

"The tribals have this animal hunting festival in Bihar. It used to be the Festival of Justice. After the hunt, the elders would bring offenders to justice. They would not go to the police. In Santali language it was the Law-bir. Law is the Law, and bir is forest. And every twelfth year, it is Jani Parab, the women's hunting festival in Bihar." (Devi xviii)

That day, she wore a colourful sari and red blouse. On the day of Jani Parab, Mary did not want to hunt small animals like hedgehogs or hares. Instead, she wanted to hunt something big. The writer says:

"A hedgehog. Go, go away! If it hadn't been today Mary would have killed it, eaten the flesh. Today, a small thing cannot please her. She wants to hunt the big beast! A man, Tehsildar." (Devi 15)

When the Tehsildar had arrived, Mary observed his face.

"There's fire in Tehsildar's eyes, his mouth is open, his lips wet with spittle, his teeth glistening. Mary is watching, watching, the face changes and changes into? Now? Yes, becomes an animal." (Devi 15)

After a while Mary paused and laughed

"Mary laughed and held him, laid him on the ground. Tehsildar is laughing, Mary lifts the machete, lowers it, lifts, lowers." (Devi 15)



She killed Tehsildar. Everywhere there was blood. She took out the wallet from Tehsildar's pocket. She got a lot of money. Then she threw Tehsildar in the ravine, hoping that hyenas and leopards would come at night and have the body.

Finally, Mary took revenge upon Tehsildar Singh and murdered him. She took revenge upon her exploiter as well as the exploiter of her land. Mary was forced to take such a revengeful act only to save her honour. She became a symbol of protest against corruption and exploitation.

After the incident, Mary came and joined the gathering of the women. She drank, sang, and danced with the fullest and ate everything with great relish. Other women saw her and mocked her for not killing a single animal.

"In the women's gathering Mary drank the most wine, sang, danced, ate the meat and rice with the greatest relish. At first everyone mocked her for not having made a kill. Then Budhni said, "Look how she's eating? As if she has made the biggest kill." (Devi 16)

Budhni and her fellow women did not know that Mary had actually killed the biggest beast. She fulfilled the real meaning of hunting by killing a beast like a man who exploited the tribal people and the natural environment. The author, Mahasweta Devi, explains to Gayatri Spivak about the tribal women. She said:

"The real point is, Gayatri, that it was Jani Parab, the women's hunting festival day. She resurrected

the real meaning of the annual hunting festival day by dealing out justice for a crime committed against the entire tribal society. One of the causes of the great Santal Revolt of 1855-56 was the raping of tribal women." (Devi xviii)

Mahasweta Devi in 'The Author in Conversation' in *Imaginary Maps* comments:

"Among the tribals, insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime. Rape is unknown to them. Women have a place of honour in tribal society." (Devi xviii)

Jani Parab is a special day for women's hunting after every twelve years. This day has a significance as it symbolises the ecstasy of women when they are given freedom. The conversation of the old women like Budhni, Mungri, Somrai and Shanichari expressed about the profusion of wild animals in the past as well as the diversity of animals in the past. They said:

"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." (Devi 11)

The degradation of the environment can be clearly seen from the conversation of the women. Mahasweta Devi's prime concern for the environment is well reflected in the story.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of the story, one can witness that Mary Oraon took revenge upon Tehsildar Singh by



murdering him. With the end of Tehsildar Singh, the threat to ecological devastation also comes to an end. So, Mary Oraon's final act served two purposes-justice to women and justice to environment. The story focuses on how the vulnerable groups, like nature and women, are exploited and abused by those who think themselves as superior and powerful. Through her writings, Mahasweta Devi always tried to highlight such issues and to create social awareness, so that every individual can contemplate and bring about a permanent solution. The resistance of Mary Oraon shows the courage and strength of women who can resist the oppression they encounter. Mary Oraon is an iconic figure whom every woman irrespective of caste and creed should follow. Mahasweta Devi's women characters are not the silent tolerators. They always prove themselves as strong warriors who can fight for their rights. Mary Oraon is such a voice from the jungle who proves the power and determination of women.

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