

Subaltern Eco-Consciousness: Traits of Sustainable Practices in Mahashweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

Sudhi P S

Research Scholar, Centre for Translation Studies, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Ernakulam, India

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ABSTRACT

During the course of the 1990s, ecocriticism gains its relevance in literary studies and slowly spread wings across the world. As a theoretical approach, it tries to reveal the link between the fictional and the physical world. Despite the lack of any specific parameters or methods, it reflects the environmental questions as not simply a subject of aesthetics, politics, poetic or ethics. '*Chotti Munda And His Arrow*' is Mahaswetha Devi's first novel based on how the landowners or the upper-class people exploited the people and their environment. It reflects the struggles of the oppressed classes in India. The novel also reveals how these ethnic minorities treat their surrounding forest in a sustainable way without knowing any of the modern perceptions about the protection and conservation efforts of the ruling community. Ecocriticism is perhaps a latecomer in the field of academics but now its influence is inevitable in all discourses because humans have understood the importance of the environment. The paper tries to analyze how the Munda tribe consciously considers the environment in their day to day life and how they achieve co-existence with the surrounding forest.

"... you will find more lessons in the woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you what you can't learn from masters." (St. Bernard, 324)

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century's intellectual and physical problem revolves around the connection between nature and culture. The concerns about environmental degradations have only come to the attention of literary studies very recently as Cheryll Glotfelty puts it, "there have been no journals, no Jargon, no jobs, no professional societies or discussion, and no conferences on literature and the environment" (Glotfelty, xvi). The debate is revolving around the impact of the scientific face of ecology over literature and how far the scopes are opened up for science to muddle through literary analysis. Michel P. Cohen asks a relevant question: "is literature and environment a sub-discipline of literary studies if an extension out of literary studies into environmental sciences or a practice largely within the paradigm of the humanities and social sciences?" (Cohen, 9). Every ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise regardless of the expansive reach of inquisition and unequal levels of coherence that the culture and environment are entangled over one another, influencing it and influenced by it. Then what are the premises of ecological criticism:

[It is] the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty, xviii).

Ecocriticism is focused on the interrelations between nature and culture and as a distinct intellectual movement "it is

largely datable to the Association for the study of literature and environment, originally in the United States and then branches in Europe, India, The Far East, and the Antipodes" (Clark, 4). The pivotal intellectual inquiry of ecocriticism is anchored on the cultural artifacts of language and literature.

Mahasweta Devi writes in Bengali and she was born in Dhaka in the year 1926. Both her parents were closely related to literature and they brought her up in literary ambiance. Her father Manish Ghatak was a poet and a novelist, and her mother Dharitri Devi was also a writer and a social worker. They came to West Bengal after the partition. Mahasweta Devi was graduated from Vishvabharati University in Santiniketan with B.A. (Hons) in English and did her post-graduation in English from Calcutta University. Her literary career spans across the pre and post era of Indian independence. In 2012 she nominated for Nobel Prize for literature. Mahasweta Devi's major works are *Jhansir Rani* (1956), *Aranyer Adhikar* (1976), *Titu Mir* (2000), *Nati* (1957), *Andhar Manik* (1966), *Hajar Churashir Ma* (1974), *Stanyadayani*, *Rudali*, *Chotti Munda Ebong Tar Tir* (1980), etc. Most of her works were translated into English and this brought her fame across seas. She has won many national and international prizes and honors, in 1979: Sahitya Akademi Award; 1986: Padma Shri; 1996: Jnanpith Award; 1997: Ramon Magsaysay Award; 2003: Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, 2006: Padma Vibhushan; 2007: SAARC Literary Award; 2010: Yashwantrao Chavan National Award; 2011: Banga Bibhushan and the list goes on. In 2009 she was Shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize and in 2012, she nominated for Nobel Prize for Literature. Until her death in 2016, she channeled the entire energy towards the upliftment of the oppressed class of the Indian society.

As a writer and as a human being Mahasweta Devi always concerned for Adivasi and other marginalized peoples. *Chotti Munda And His Arrow* (*Chotti Munda Ebong Tar Tir*) is the first novel of Mahaswetha on Adivasi. In which

she tells the story of its titular hero, Chotti Munda, legendary archer, and tribal leader. Mahasweta Devi says:

I find that Birsa's uprising did not die with Birsa Munda and so through the figure of Dhani, I wanted to say that there had to be a magic arrow, not magic in the narrow sense, but an arrow that Dhani Munda wants to hand over. This arrow is a symbol for the person who will carry on that continuity. Chotti is an emblem of that (Devi, x).

Chotti Munda And His Arrow (Chotti Munda Ebang Tar Tir), written in Bengali in 1980 and was translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The novel reveals the story of the Munda tribe from the days of Ulgulan Revolt. The more of the things change, the more the Munda remains the same track that is the bitter truth about this marginalized community. The novel also reveals how the Adivasi practice and teaches environmental ethics. In Mahasweta Devi's own words: "I have documented it; these things will vanish and thus came Chotti Munda. In it so many experiences, I had stored them so lovingly – Chotti is my best beloved book" (Devi, xii).

Ecological and environmental problems are conclusions of structural hierarchy and elitism in human society and its motive in either way is to make a profit out of the suppressed people and the natural environment. The popular hypothesis orbit around these exploitations is that the natural world is primarily a resource for human beings alone. At this juncture, anthropocentrism evolved as the crucial problem and by opposing the trends of anthropocentrism Aldo Leopold says:

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. . . .The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals or collectively: the Land (Leopold, 204).

2. The 'Subaltern'

The concept of 'subaltern' dates back to the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini in Italy. The proponent of the concept was Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist political activist. In his renowned "Prison notebooks" he defines: "the subaltern classes by definition are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "state": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of states and groups of states (Gramsci, 20). After the enrichment of post-colonial discourses, the term has acquired the responsibility to represent the discriminated peoples of the erstwhile colonies. The concept has developed into 'Subaltern Studies' and spreads its influence over a range of disciplines. Ranjith Guha, one of the founders of the subaltern studies group argues that the subaltern is a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age Gender, and office or in any other way" (Guha, 18). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is another advocate of the concept but she has a disagreement on the overemphasizing nature of the term and she uses it in a more specific sense. She argues:

Subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. (Spivak, 30)

In Indian context, the term subaltern signifies communities that are communicatively and comprehensively disadvantaged and subordinated through the structure and agency of the caste system. Partha Chatterjee's words are relevant here: "No matter how we choose to characterize it, subaltern consciousness in the specific cultural context of India cannot but contain caste as a central element in its constitution" (Chatterjee, 169). In an article entitled 'Subalterns, identity politics and Christian theology in Asia' Sathianathan Clarke writes:

However, this formal definition will have material implications, which raises the following question: Based on a definition contingent on the caste system, which specific groupings need to be incorporated in to the subaltern? There will be general consensus that all communities outside of the caste society will form the substratum of the subaltern. Thus Dalit and Adivasi communities form the foundation of the subaltern (Clarke, 280)

3. 'Eco-consciousness' in context

Issues related to environmental degradation and human-nature relationship bring forth innovative inquiries to traditional thought and argument. The practice of endangering the planet must be addressed and for that reach, different tools can be used to achieve the goal. Ecocriticism is one such tool and based on the requirements of the issue it can be modified again and again. Multidisciplinary approaches are crucial in achieving this type of intellectual transformation. The Indian milieu related to land and land rights of the oppressed people is not just questions of social, cultural and political problems only but rather covers the environment as well. In recent years, there have been several attempts to raise public consciousness about environmental degradation in India. Awareness has been created in media and by government organizations for the preservation of the natural environment. Literature is the best medium to create awareness among peoples; India has substantial literature for creating ecological consciousness.

The concept of consciousness is itself ambiguous in nature but according to the level of inquiry, it can be defined further. The word 'consciousness' is derived from the Latin *conscio* which is a combination of *cum* and *scio*. In Latin, it means 'to be conscious of something'. In psychological terminology, it is a state of mind in general. Oxford English Dictionary defines it as 'the state of being able to use your senses and mental powers to understand what is happening'. According to John Rogers Searle, it is the "primary and most essential feature of mind"(Searle, 40) and consciousness is "those states of sentience or awareness that typically begin when we wake up in the morning from a dreamless sleep and continue throughout the day until we fall asleep again (Searle, 40-41). The awareness in the wake-up state is crucial in determining the issues related to the environment and able to use one's senses and mental power to understand and act accordingly.

3.1. Subaltern 'eco-consciousness'

Mahasweta Devi describes Adivasi practices, especially about the Munda tribe in her first novel on tribes *Chotti Munda And His Arrow*. The marginalized people of the Munda tribe

are associated with the wisdom of managing land and its resources. They are unconsciously conscious about their surroundings and how to treat them accordingly. The 'eco-consciousness' as a concept derived from ecology and the consciousness about the environment and when it is applied to the subaltern context, it becomes the consciousness about the environment shown by the subaltern people. A study of their everyday life will make it clear that as a society they are sustainable and understands how to treat the resources thoughtfully and efficiently.

The early part of the work indicates that the Mundas are nomadic. Traditionally they were not nomadic, but hunters and cultivators. Purti Munda, the grandfather of Chotti and Koel had moved to the *Chotti* region near the *Chotti* River, which is the source of the *Damodar* River, from Chaibasha and Palamau. The reason for his nomadic existence was that the land he cleared for settlement happened to yield mice, coal, gold and Stone Age weapons. Mahaswetha describes this situation as "He sat down on the sand. He remembers how white men and Biharis jumped at the sight of coal and mica" (Devi, 2). Purti Munda wants only a simple and peaceful life for his people and nothing is more important than the sacred hills and rivers. He says:

Who knows what such people will do if they see gold? These hills, this river will be once again be spoiled. With great loss of spirit he brought up sand once more in his open palms. Gold again (Devi, 2).

Gold is not precious than the hills, river and the forest in the eyes of Purti Munda. Wati Longchar writes:

The tribal world of culture can be explained only in term of the world of nature. We can't understand tribal culture adequately without understanding the world of nature. They are inseparable related. Once we divorce, we lose the meaning of life. For tribals, nature is not only a mechanical system, but it includes everything that is qualitative and spiritual (Longchar, 24).

Chotti and his group did not prefer bonded labor, but looked forward to working on Tirathnath's land even if the wages were very low and even if he cheated them, for it was a pleasure to work on the land. The land is more than a mere economic resource for them. Their ecological knowledge is linked with their spiritual belief. Chotti's reply to Anwar, who wanted to convert his long-idle arable land into a flower garden, goes like this:

put t' ash from their burnt huts on yer land. Fallow land, Land never rests without owners me lord. Land has a soul too, who knows if t' soul's good or bad. If ye put a bitta ash, whate'er rage it has'll go. Too, t' soil'll be happy (Devi, 217).

The land is the foundation of human life. Chotti knows the land; it is not a dead 'thing' to him. Human survival depends on land and had become part of the land and resources. They have great respect for the land and its resources. Dhani Munda says: "I've returned home lads! He stoops and sits, lemme eat dirt, lemme eat home dirt! Home soil has t' sweet smell of rice lads! Lemme eat earth!" (Devi, 18). The Munda people as a community is inside the whole surrounding forest not above it. Hunting is an integral part of their lifestyle so all Mundas hunt. In all their activities, they keep a delicate sense of balance amid their needs. Dhani Munda says to Chotti:

"listen to hunting tip. When ye kill, finish with one arrer. Don' make t' prey suffer for nothin'!" (Devi, 12). The tribal people teach their children many of their eco-friendly ways of living. Chotti's son Harmu killed a female bird, by seeing it Chotti teaches his children: Let's not see that again. T' family of life grows larger wit' girl animals, girl birds. I make ye know girl critters and birds. (Devi, 77).

The number of kills is honestly proportional to the number of mouths to be fed. Living off the forest, they are agile and nimble and train their eyes to see even in the darkness of the forest space. Dhani Munda says: "let me learn ye t' jungle. With jungle learnin' ye won' die starvin'. What isn't there in t' jungle?" (Devi, 11). Class hierarchy is barely seen in Munda life style. They live in harmony and it is evident in their practice. They will act as a whole when there is a need and in the novel, one such occasion is described as how they address the natural calamities like drought. When the river and wells went dry they dig the riverbed to find water caught between the stones under the shade of a tree. The people plant trees along the river banks to create more shadows to harvest water during a drought:

The hole-digging is like a joint festival for the Munda. The men dug up the sand, and the women threw the sand at a distance on the bank. Gradually they dug ten pits. The water rose up. They got the water right there. Don' dirty this water with dirty cloth or baths, said Chotti. He added, precious water (Devi, 101).

The relation between animals and tribal people is another example of how they co-exist with other living beings. Mahaswetha Devi says: ". . . of course they learn to use arrows and other weapons, but they don't go to kill alone. They also help nature to survive. They use weapons but they are not bloodthirsty. They are basically gentle, polite, highly civilized, and this innate blood civilization runs back thousands of years. A tribe lives in harmony with the nature around him, with human beings, even intruders, with everyone. So when he kills, it is a necessary killing. (Devi xix). Animals like deer and boar have always spoiled the paddy fields but they never treated it as a sin; Chotti says:

Now deer don't come drawn by the smell of ripe paddy. They are not there. Everyone, hunting in any fashion, has killed them all off. If there are any animals left, they've gone off in to the deep forest for fear of human (Devi, 127).

The question here is how to represent animal lives in human language and culture without illusion or injustice? James Rachel writes:

We kill animals for food; we use them as experimental subjects in laboratories; we exploit them as sources of raw material such as leather and wool; we keep them as work animals. These practices are to our advantage, and we intend to continue them. Thus, when we think about what animals are like we are motivated to conceive them in ways that are compatible with treating them insight seem monstrous. So human have reasons to resist thinking of them as intelligent or sensitive (Rachel, 129).

Subalterns and their consciousness about nature are inseparable. The word 'Adivasi' means not only people but the tree, the river, the animals, the air, the wind and everything

associated with them. The modern society under the claws of globalization portrays the tribes as uncivilized. But the fact is that the tribal world of culture can be explained only in terms of the world of nature; understand nature first then only one can appreciate their attitudes.

4. Conclusion

Every human should learn to love the tree, the stone, the animals, and everything that surrounds them. The tribes and forest are inseparable, but the modern law forces them to separate from their mother forest. How tribes understood themselves to be part of their environment was thus quite a different form of how others understand themselves as part of the biological culture. They can understand the language and the joy of the surrounding environment, its cries, and tears. The movement of the birds and animal and get the message from them what they are trying to say. But the modern man can't perceive what tribes can. Today it is said that tribes are illiterate. But In a real sense they got their education by climbing trees by picking flowers and fruits, by roaming in the

forest, they were ecologically literate people. The modern world can't understand this lifestyle of the tribal people. Any tribal community anywhere in the world shares a flow of energy between them and their environment. They are unconsciously conscious about the environment they live in.

The work of art and literature are the best tools to remind humans to be conscious of the environment. In all sense, Mahashwetha Devi has done a wonderful job by taking Munda people as the core of her novel. In modern times the air, the light, the atmosphere is artificial and that comes from an artificial concept of 'Nature'. Technological advancement can only create a tiny part of nature and the atmosphere and the environment cannot be tamed by the vivid imaginations of mankind and hence the green color that is printed on the papers and the banners or painted on the walls will not rescue the planet earth from the catastrophe. In the age of environmental catastrophe deforestation, Adivasi life can guide mankind to reduce the impact on the environment in countless ways.

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