AN APPLICATION OF ECOCRITICISM TO THE STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI’S SHORT STORY ‘THE HUNT’

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The present paper applies the tenets of ecocriticism to the study of Mahasweta Devi’s short story ‘The Hunt’. Ecocriticism is a new branch of interdisciplinary literary study that tries to find tangible connections between literature and environment. Degradation of the environment tops the list of problems the world faces today. Ecocriticism functions as a tool that draws the attention of the world to crucial environmental issues through analysis of literature. The study substantiates Mahasweta Devi’s basic idea of the inter-dependence of nature and human nature and the dangers of over exploitation of nature resulting in outburst of nature. The reaction to such indiscriminate exploitation is represented in the story through the symbolic destruction of the contractor indulging in felling of trees through Mary Oraon, a child of nature.

The present paper applies the tenets of ecocriticism to the study of Mahasweta Devi’s Short story ‘The Hunt’. Ecocriticism is a new branch of interdisciplinary literary study that tries to find tangible connections between literature and environment. The critical studies of the early 20th century were concerned with the formal features of literature. Stylistics also developed linguistic tools of analysis and identified how a literary work communicates to the reader. Ever since Marxist criticism developed the emphasis shifted to study of man in relation to his fellow men in terms of social structures and the political implication of them. Though nature has often been identified as an important element represented in literature and its possible influence on man, there were no systematic study of man-nature relationship per se. It is only depletion of natural resources and global warming as a result of industrialization and over exploitation of the Earth, that have drawn the attention of literary critics to the close relationship of man and nature. It is this change in environment that has brought about the rethink on this critical relationship.
Ecocriticism, a phenomenon of 1980s is a branch of literary criticism which is being discussed world wide as an interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment. It covers science, literature, anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc and attempts to study the attitude of mankind towards nature. Other terms for this relatively new genre are ‘ecocritic’, ‘ecopoetics’, ‘environmental literary criticism’ and ‘green cultural studies’.

The application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature is named ‘ecocriticism’. It was William Rueckert who coined the term in 1978 in his essay, ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism’. The following are the various definitions of ecocriticism that will help one to understand the scope and implications of this new development in literary studies.

Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism reader* defines ecocriticism as “…. The study of the relationship between literature and physical environment…….. ecocriticism takes an earth–centered approach to literary studies.” (p. XVIII). Glen A Love in *Practical Ecocriticism* defines ecocriticism as a literary enquiry that “Encompasses nonhuman as well as human contacts and considerations.” (p.1)

Ecocriticism is not only the application of ecology and ecological principles but also the study of literature and theoretical approach to the interrelations of nature and culture. This relationship has been reflected by writers and poets throughout different cultures and ages across the world. A variety of novels, poems and other expressions of literature have been depicted on the back drop of issues concerning nature. The rest of this paper studies “The Hunt”, a short story of Mahasweta Devi, in the light of ecocriticism.

The present study substantiates Mahasweta Devi’s basic idea of the interdependence of nature and human nature and the dangers of over exploitation of nature resulting in outburst of nature. Nature according to Mahasweta Devi is organically linked with human life and it also serves as the most significant imagery.

Mahasweta Devi is an activist who has written, worked and fought for the marginalized for the past six decades. She was born in 1926 in the city of Dacca in East Bengal. After completing her M.A. degree in English Literature from Calcutta University, she started working as a teacher and journalist. Her first book, *Jhansi Rani* (The Queen of Jhansi), was published in 1956. During the last fifty years, she has published twenty collections of short stories and close to hundred novels, primarily in her mother tongue of Bengali. She has also been a regular contributor to several literary magazines such as *Bortika*, a journal dedicated to the cause of oppressed communities within India. In 1984, she retired from her job as an English lecturer at Calcutta University to concentrate on her writing. She has been awarded several literary prizes. Some of them are the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979, the Padma Shri Award in 1986, the Jnanpith Award in 1996, the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997, the Honoris Causa in 1999, the Padma Vibhushan in 2006, Yashwantrao Chavan National Award in 2010, Bangabidhushan Award in 2011, Hall of Fame Lifetime Achievement - *Sahityabramha* in 2012 and First Mamoni Raisom Goswami National Award in 2014. Even in her late eighties, her dedication to her mission and her creative writing has not faded.
'The Hunt' with two other stories ‘Dauloti the Bountiful’ and ‘Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha’ of Mahasweta Devi figure in Imaginary Maps (1995). The present study confines itself to ‘The Hunt’ as the other stories in the collection deal more with the lives of tribal communities within India.

The story falls into three sections. Section one explains the peaceful tribal life overtaken by a few estate owners and their exploitation of the people of the region. Mary Oraon is one such victim of exploitation. Dixon an Australian planter employs and exploits her mother, Bhikni and his son his successor impregnates the woman and deserts her and runs away to his own land. Prasadji the new owner of the estate continues them in his service and they remain his willing slaves. Mahasweta Devi captures Mary’s work at Prasadji’s estate. She writes: “Mary pastures the (as in the original) Prasads’ cattle. She is the most capable cowherd…with Mary the agreement is for board and lodging, clothing and sundries. The Dixon bungalow was built as a residence for whites. Bhikni says the whites kept twelve ayahs-servants-sweepers. Under Prasadji Mary alone keeps the huge bungalow clean” (Imaginary Maps, p 2. Subsequent references to the book are indicated with page numbers in parenthesis). This reveals how Mary lives as a bonded slave.

Section two deals with the landing of Tehsildar Singh, the contractor on the quiet but impoverished existence of Kuruda. It marks the onset of the mainstream mechanized and industrialized exploitation and the total alienation and reification of the tribes. Section three marks the desperations of the tribes on their being forced to resort to violence as the only possible alternative when the system fails in justice.

In the conversation Mahasweta Devi had with Gayatri Spivak, published at the beginning of the text of Imaginary Maps, she describes, the tribals lead their lives in harmony with nature, i.e. they loved the earth, the flora and the fauna and see their own lives in many aspects conforming to the lives of other species of their genus animal. She explains that the hunting tribes would beg forgiveness, if they were forced to fell a tree. The tribal would say,” You are our friend. I do this because my wife doesn’t have any food, my son doesn’t have any food, my daughter starves. Before they killed an animal, they used to pray to the animal, the bird, the fish, the deer.”(p ii)

Whereas mainstream Indians indulge in indiscriminate felling of trees and killing of other species for their greedy self-aggrandisement, the tribals sparingly indulge in distraction out of their necessity. Mahasweta Devi contends about the tribals that “they understand ecology and the environment in a way the mainstream Indians cannot even imagine” (p. ii)

Mahasweta Devi’s story ‘The Hunt’ centres around the animal hunting festival, the most popular myth of the tribals of Bihar. The original title in Bengali is “Shikar” which means the hunt. Explaining the contest of the myth, Devi writes in the story,” Once there were (wild) animals in the forest, life was wild, the hunt game had meaning.” (p 12) In this sense the myth marked the protection of the entire tribe and its environment from the destructive animals. The tradition, however, is kept up long after it had lost its relevance.

Every year in the spring season, the gong sounds one day in the priest’s house. It marks the beginning of the hunt festival. During the festival they go out bows and arrows into
the forest and hunt wild animals like hedge hogs and leopards. After the hunt, they picnic together, drink liquor, sing and return home in the evening. For twelve years men run the hunt. Then comes the women’s turn, which is popularly known as “Jani Parab”. The festival has a second dimension too. “After the hunt the elders would bring offenders to justice.”

The myth informs the central theme of the story. Tehsildar Singh a greedy mainstream contractor lands in the quiet village of Kuruda with intentions of felling and carrying away the giant sal trees in Prasadji’s estate of seventy five acres of land. The tribals’ interest and well being at once of man and nature is represented by Mary Oraon, who embodies the intelligence of the west and the love of the tribals. She puts her intelligence to the best use and tries to counsel Prasadji and other village head men, but to no avail. She explains to Prasadji that the contractor had tricked him and would get the sals at throw away price and would sell them to the timber merchants at an exorbitant rate by cubic foot. Prasadji is misled by his son and other village mirazdars like Lalchand and Mulni. Nor is Mary able to influence the Kuruda elders who have all been bribed by the contractor. They commission the tribal laborers at unreasonably low wages. She said,” twelve annas and eight annas! No porter carried gentlemen’s case for this price” (p 9)

Though the government of India has passed laws declaring illegal the felling of trees in forest regions the government machinery is so corrupt that the illegal action never comes to light. In her conversation with Gayatri Spivak, Mahasweta Devi explains the great skill with which this illegal deforestation continues all over India. To quote her, “Big money is involved…..The local political worthies, local police, local administrations are bribed. The railways cooperate by carrying this illegal felled timber. Illegal saw mills come up everywhere.” (p xii). According to the writer there are bosses in the cities behind the whole enterprise. Thus the happenings in Kuruda are representative of what happens in the whole of India. Events in the short story, the writer declares are authentic, including the character of Mary. She says she has actually seen her and heard her life history from the songs of the tribes. Thus the story combines the particular and the representative.

The tribals are blamed for deforestation. One of the village elders explains to Mary, “If I said ‘No’, the villagers would go wild. They would say who gives us this kind of money? “(p 9). In her own life, once a tribal told Mahasweta Devi, “I need five rupees a day to buy rice. Ask me to fell a tree, I’ll do it unwillingly, but I’ll do it.” (p xii) (emphasis added).

Mahasweta Devi’s contention is that, “The hands that fell the trees are not the hands responsible for the deforestation all over India.” (p xii). This incidentally explains the Naxalite movement against the exploitation of the poor peasants. Mary’s protest suggests the solution, “Not twelve annas and eight annas, ‘We will bargain for three or two rupees.” (p 9).

In such a desperate condition of total system failure in justice, individuals cannot go on suffering in silence, the victims have been forced to resort to violence to redress their grievances. Mahasweta Devi observes in her conversation, “I think as for as the tribals or the
oppressed are concerned,….When the system fails in justice, violence is justified.” (p xi & xii).

Tehsildar Singh in the story is the representative of the mainstream power that exploits the poor workers as well as the earth. The myth of hunt game is rehearsed through Mary Oraon, who like Mother Earth is also viewed by the contractor as an object to be exploited. She identifies him as the wild ‘a-ni-mal’. She takes law into her own hands and dispenses justice by killing him on the festival day. At the end, she walks “fearless as she has killed the biggest beast” (p 17).

Thus the myth gets well integrated with the present day tribal life. The story promotes awareness among the powers that be, that because of their negligence, deforestation goes on undeterred. Government should intervene and prevent deforestation on war footing and the tribals should be educated and guaranteed a minimum standard of living and purposeful engagements, if the land and its people are to remain secure and protected from degeneration.

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