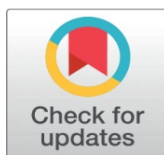


ERADICATING SUPERSTITIONS THROUGH LITERATURE: MAHASWETA DEVI AND HER LITERARY EXCELLENCE

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to examine the short tale *Witch* by Mahasweta Devi from the collection *Bitter Soil* (1998) from an ecofeminist standpoint, emphasizing the negative impacts of extra-activism, the system of bonded labour, and the exploitation of the environment and the underprivileged. In this short narrative, Devi eloquently depicts the subjugation of the tribal society, the exploitation of the environment, the outrages, and the prejudices of tribal women. Both the British Empire's pre-independence rulers and the mediaeval ancient kings drove tribal people from their ancestral lands; post-colonial India's development initiatives, like land conversion and forest degradation, made their complaints even worse. Devi fosters ecological consciousness and the coexistence of humans and nature in the selected work. According to the article, extra-activism is a more profit-driven concept that is indifferent to the harm done to both people and the environment. It also methodically examines how the narrative *Witch* contributes a fresh perspective to the current ecofeminist debate, drawing on a number of Western and Indian ideas that are even more eclectic.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Resistance, Subjugation, Extra-activism, Feminine, Superstitions

INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali novelist (1926–2016), was a social activist, feminist, and advocate for tribal tribes. Her body of work comprises almost three hundred fictional narratives. She utilizes diverse genres—short tales, novels, dramas, essays, and journalistic writings—to depict the modern socio-political realities of independent India. She has been acknowledged for her literary and social contributions to the nation, and her works have received plaudits from both national and international organizations.

Mahasweta Devi's contemplations on the challenges faced by tribal communities, the subjugation of women, and the degradation of the environment provide profound insights. As an activist-writer, she utilized her writing as a medium to articulate her social concerns regarding grassroots organization. She was an advocate for the rights of tribal groups and a founding member of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG). This organization advocates for the acknowledgement of India's indigenous populations by engaging in educational outreach, legal intervention, and

community advocacy. Devy (2004) designates Mahasweta Devi as “Adivasi Mahasweta” due to her profound connection with the tribal milieu, her impactful prose, and her political ideology.

Devi’s connection with the tribal people occurred far back in the year 1965 in an impoverished Palamau area in Bihar. She was astonished when she first observed the subjection of the tribal populace by the local despots. She watched the indigenous communities being pushed to accept the concept of capitalism leading to persecution and discrimination (Yook, 2018, p. 12). Her works highlight ongoing plot of chauvinist and capitalist ideologist who abuses the deprived. Her articles emphasize the necessity for everyone to be cognizant of being exploited, and the determination needed to oppose it.

Though various Indian women writers have offered depth and richness to Indian ecofeminism, Devi’s palpable awareness of political engagement has added a new dimension to the narrative of Indian ecofeminism. Many researchers have viewed her writings from feminist and post-colonial perspectives with subaltern sympathies (e.g., Collu, 1999; Wenzel, 1998) but there are only a limited number of scholarly papers that study Devi as an environmental writer. This article explores Devi’s *Witch* which is a story from the book *Bitter Soil* (Devi, 1998) via an ecofeminist lens. The locale of the story is Palamau, which is a “mirror of India” (p. vii). *Witch* as a short story echoes post-colonial India and illustrates the painful effects of growth-sponsored projects on nature and forest-based community members and also their indignation at such exploitative development. In this story, the important characters are: Misra (a priest in Shiva Mandir), pahaan (head priest), Mathur (literate person), and Somri who is the daughter of pahaan. Misra becomes a strong figure by leveraging the lack of education and superstition of tribal people. Somri who served in the residence of Misra is a mute girl and she was raped by Misra’s son. She was labelled as a daini to avoid the legal ramifications of the sexual offence. Tribal people were led to believe that famine in the hamlet was due to the daini and they chase her. Finally, they came to know that the truth was out and realized the nefarious play of Misra.

This paper discusses the perilous status of the indigenous population in modern India, which is depicted in *Witch*. It tries to study the links between environmental deterioration and its effects in the life of the oppressed, notably indigenous women. It is an endeavor to trace the aspects of ecofeminism and investigate how the chosen work offers a fresh dimension to the ecofeminist discourse. The short novel *Witch* (Devi, 1998) typifies the unscrupulous, irresponsible and subjugating behavior of hegemonic society, and the dominance of the haves over have-nots, the results of which prove largely catastrophic to both human and non-human in general, and to the women in particular. It also exposes the blatant disregard toward environment, women and the deprived, which is interlaced in a socially pragmatic way. It addresses various aspects such as caste, gender, patriarchy, environmental degradation and several others that create the intricate fabric of tribal societies in modern India.

This paper analyzes *Witch*, based on two essential premises of ecofeminism. It studies the patriarchal ideology of extractivism as the fundamental cause for the exploitation of women and nature; then it analyzes how a powerless woman merely falls victim to the forces of exploitation in a Third World country like India through the study of the daini, the protagonist.

In the brief tale *Witch*, nature is disregarded and women are exploited sexually by the crafty nature of the patriarchal dictators. The ecofeminist perspective of the short story indicates that Misra, the priest of Shiva Mandir, not only grabs the land from the peasants to quench his avaricious desire but also brands the naive woman Somri as a daini to mask his son’s evil crime. It is apparent that privileged men abuse both women and the land to show their authority by exploiting uneducated and occult practices as a tool to fool the people. As hunger is rampant, individuals are scared of daini, a violent witch, hunting to take the sinful souls. The credulous peasants visit Misra to find the cause of calamity. He prostrates himself before the divinity and claims that it had sent him an astounding dream A terrifying naked woman uttered the words, “I am famine”, before floating away on a blood-soaked cloud. According to the panjika, she is a *daini*. This *daini* is to be found and driven away. If she is wounded, if she bleeds, or if she is burnt to death, a terrible calamity will be visited upon them. (Devi, 1998, p. 59)

The tough mission of intrepid locals to hunt the daini is spearheaded by pahaan. “Everyone, young, aging and old, lights his torch at this fire. Stones slipped into the folds around their waists. Then the pahaan.....calls out ‘Ha Aaba Harmdeo, help me chase away the daini!’” (Devi, 1998, p. 77). “Witch-hunting” is rampant among tribal communities in post-colonial India and it claims many innocent lives. Kislaya (2019) says that witch-hunting is a societal disease that is based in the patriarchy, and the broader purpose behind this social evil is land grabbing and sexual exploitation. In 2001, the Indian government passed a Dayan Pratha (prevention of witch practices) Act to abolish the superstition and safeguard women from this horrible behavior, yet it remains ineffective. According to a National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) research, it is estimated that as many as 2,290 women were labelled as “witches” and slain in India during the period

2001–2014. Chakraborty (2010) argues that it is an innate quality of powerful men to punish or settle scores with whom they have familial disputes (p. 123). Washington Post writes despite several awareness campaigns the less developed states like Bihar and Jharkhand continue conduct witch-hunting and women are branded as witches on an average of five each month. The apathy to the destruction of the environment is a close approximation to the eternal pain that women face (Mies & Shiva, 1993). In truth, Misra developed a bogus persona daini in *Witch* and used it as cover for his son's evil deed. To protect his son against the legal implications of assaulting Somri, he started the daini narrative (Devi, 1998, p. 98). Misra manipulated the locals by making use of their superstitious beliefs to fulfil his purpose. Somri raped by Misra's son, is pregnant and has been deserted. "She is dumb! She can't speak. Her body grew, but not her!" (Devi, 1998, p. 122). Her infirmity depicts the hardship of voiceless women in the tribal culture, and their voices are muted by the patriarchal standards. She is a victim of the oppression of patriarchy. Her screams of 'Anhanhanh' (p. 79) were not the hunting screams of a witch but a cry for rescue. Once banished to the jungle, she turned to eating raw flesh to satiate her hunger. The representation of Somri in the story degrades her to the condition of an animal. Devi corroborates the premise that the victim of patriarchal tyranny cannot stay human; oppression dehumanizes human beings. Through the daini, Devi symbolically demonstrates how the patriarchal system converts land (nature) and women into a commodity to be seized, looted and mined by opposing masculine powers. Somri is not the solitary victim of such brutality; there are thousands of indigenous women who are thus tortured in the name of superstition. It must be highlighted here that marginalization through superstition persists because of the separation of the tribals from mainstream society.

During the course of the witch-hunting, the daini twists her face. She is "a distended grotesque figure". Mathur recognizes that it is not a daini but a human being (Devi, 1998, p. 115). Hundreds of peasants congregate in front of the cave. "The mood is vengeful violence" (Devi, 1998, p. 117). They thought that the heat would drive the daini out:

With the ordered precision of soldiers, these bloodthirsty people pile the bushes and branches at the mouth of the cave. Someone from the Dhari village fetches kerosene, pours it on. The fire grows. The smoke fills the cave. Green branches snap loudly in the flames... (Devi, 1998, p. 118) Devi shows the bestial treatment and the state of the tribes in their ties with their exploiter. "Anh-anh-anh-anh-anh! the screech, the scream, a human cry, after all is human beings who convert into dainis. Suddenly, the shrieking ends and a horrible silence. As if a newborn kid is crying" (Devi, 1998, p. 119). The pahaan understands that the screams are not of a daini but of his daughter Somri. He gets inside the blaze to observe an astonishing scene: "on the floor of the cave kneels pahaan. A woman is lying nude. Between her legs still attached by the umbilical chord, is the newborn infant" (Devi, 1998, p. 120). The sight of Somri still linked by the umbilical chord to her young kid, is a striking representation of how males have failed to safeguard their women. As the mob comprehends the situation, their dread of the daini disappears, the people attend to Somri and her newborn and a "profound peace" fills the woodland. The locals comprehend that it is not an exceptional drought that has plagued the village but just a tyrant's cloud of terror that made them "think otherwise". The female tribals are doubly denigrated and exploited, not just by gender discrimination but also by capitalist and patriarchal Indian society. As women are "traditionally regarded as a field" and men "as the seed", these gender interactions result in and cement "oppressive bondage for women" by men (Nubile, 2003, p. 23). In the short story, just as land is plowed and seeded, the daini's body was ravaged by the male dictator.

Somri branded as a daini, the principal character of *Witch*, firmly felt much safer in the forest. "The daini began to run towards the forest" (Devi, 1998, p. 102). She personifies nature as an empathic guardian and sanctuary in misery. She hid in the jungles to escape from the judgmental, conventional beliefs of the society. The daini found nature a loving companion in whose company she could forget the hierarchy existent in the society and all the sorrows of victimhood. The civilization drove her insane, while nature provided her a sense of protection and peace. The comment of Judith Plant (1989) regarding the link between the exploitation of women and the ecological catastrophe is of specific value in this context: "The rape of the earth, in all its forms, becomes a metaphor for woman in all its many guises" (p. 238). Ecofeminism is founded on the social critique that the control of women and nature by patriarchal ideology and western model of growth are parallel with each other. Therefore, the impacts of oppression of women and the ecological devastation are the symptoms of the same illness (Sydee & Beder, 2001, p. 281).

The exploitation of nature in the short story *Witch* is indicative of the exploitation of women in the rural. Misra acquired acres of land for a price cheaper than it should have been; he destroyed nature and exploited its riches. Similarly, Somri's body was exploited; she was chased away from her house and a bogus story was made to portray her as a daini. Somri kept herself away from everyone, while nature refused to give rain, which resulted in hunger. Therefore, the novel very much engages with the actual experience of the uneducated village population subjugated by those belonging to upper

strata of society recognized for material concerns alone. Devi's narrative in *Witch* portrays the victimization of the lowest layer of society by the avaricious capitalist mindset of men, which is contemporary with the elimination of the tribal ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

Mahasweta Devi's short novel *Witch* allows for a critique of the major ecofeminist conceptual discourse, which appears in the assertion of Ruether (1975, p. 195), "patriarchal self-deception about the origin of consciousness ends logically in the destruction of the earth". Although she herself refrains from being an ecofeminist, a critical analysis of the story reveals that she is in favor of broader gender inclusivity and the association of women with nature. Her narratives do not construct the tribal women of India as a monolithic group but instead draws the attention of the readers to numerous other variables that compose the complex fabric of tribal societies in modern India. Her literature stresses the sufferings of tribal women and centralizes the voices of the oppressed women. The mental torment of Somri in *Witch* has been written eloquently, and the materialistic patriarchic attitude of the society has been highlighted by the writer. She believes that the existence of mankind is conceivable only when human beings accept and revere Mother Nature rather than usurp it for selfish profit. Her novel uncovers her concern about the rising imbalance between man and nature due to globalization, privatization and the capitalistic agendas of many governments. It is apparent that modern developmentalism can never fathom the indefinable peculiar relationship of the tribal aboriginals with the forests. Devi is humorously critical of modern technology-oriented developments. As Singh points out, Devi's writing has a double purpose. "In her, we find the concrete alternative to resist and destroy not only the injustice of gender politics but also the incursion upon tribal land and forest by feudalism, colonialism and global capitalism" (Singh, 2011, p. 9). She catches the multi-tiered levels of bio-degradation that endanger humans and the profound shift that it brings about in the soil, water, and air. By forging together, the twin-discourses of creativity and an activist worldview, Mahasweta Devi stands out as a conscientious author who points out the potential of accepting the ecofeminist insight into the neglected lives of the underprivileged.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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None

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