

Environmental Justice an Ecocritical Element in Mahasweta Devi's Two Short Stories 'Little Ones' and 'Salt'

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Abstract

Ecocriticism, which started in 1980s in US, promoted interdisciplinary approach to literature which focused on the representation of environmental concerns in the texts citing the relation of literature and environment. The Environmental Justice Movement grew along the literary movement was moreover a sociological approach to the environmental concern of the mass. Environmental justice regarded as the second wave of ecocriticism by and large was considered to be a revisionist approach which voiced the weak of the society with an intention to raise awareness and protest against environmental degradation and hazards taking toll on their physical and mental health and wellbeing. The social movement focused on the judicious distribution of the environmental benefits and burdens. Since the unjust distribution of environmental benefits was affected by race, class, caste nationality and gender of people which reflected in the development of people. Affiliation to the anthropocentric components highlights the issue of bad impact of unequal distribution of environmental resources on the growth of the people specially belonging to the margins. It is not only about human beings as species but it includes many others including humans. Environmental justice is against the notion of social inequality being established as innate nature, 'naturalized' or approved as 'god given' or inescapable rather it promotes it as the product of power struggle. It seeks to locate the vestiges of nature in cities and exposes crimes of injustice against societies' unvoiced section. This paper attempts to find out the notion of environmental injustice in the two short stories of Mahasweta Devi named 'Little Ones' and 'Salt'. Mahashaweta Devi is a prolific writer who beautifully portrays the communion of the nature and man in her short stories and fiction. Dealing with the exploitation and marginalization of the dalits and adivasis from close quarters, she speaks about their life of struggle to earn a decent livelihood and to enable them to fight for their rights. Moreover, she makes an attempt to voice the difficulties of the unvoiced inhabiting in the regions of Bihar and West Bengal to "expose many faces of the exploiting agencies... all of whom, as a combined force, are out for lower caste blood" is her purpose behind writing short stories such as 'Little Ones' and 'Salt'.

KEYWORDS: Environmental justice, Unvoiced, Tribal literature, Eco-criticism.

Ecocriticism, an intentional broad approach is interdisciplinary by its very nature. New theories like Post-colonial Ecocriticism, Eco-marxism, Eco-spiritualism and Ecofeminism are coming into light. Ecocriticism differs from other theories in the context that while all other theories consider earth as a social sphere, ecocriticism takes it as an ecosphere. Moreover, all other theories have been marked by ego-consciousness, Ecocriticism has been characterized by eco-consciousness. It is

therefore , an earth centric approach to literary studies which promotes the understanding of who we are, where we stand and how we should behave with our mother nature.

Ecocriticism underlines environmental justice as man's voracious urge to conquer nature is somewhat misleading. Earlier we believed ourselves to be superior from the other life forms that inhabit the biosphere, but now we realized that nature is not a subordinate but a co- inhabitant of this earth ecosystem. The need is to change our self- destructive motives. If human beings try to destroy nature, nature will pay back them by their own coins. The global crisis is not because how ecosystems function, but because how our ethical systems function. The requirement is to understand how do we have an impact on nature. Also understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them.

English literature has given tremendous impetus to the development of literature in native Indian language and creative and translational efforts in English. English has inspired innumerable writers over the last two centuries, ranging from Sri Aurobindo, Tagore and Vivekananda to Ramanujan, Rushdie, Vikram Seth and others. A recent social activist, Mahasweta Devi with her hundred odd novels and innumerable articles and short stories is worthy of being added to the canon. Her fictional and non-fictional writings give voice to the voiceless tribals in Bihar , West Bengal and other regions of India. Her transmutation of authentic social data into creative material would guarantee her a place in the criteria of great literature. She identifies in the tribals many human and humane values which have gradually vanished among the Mainstream Indian population. Their close affinity to nature and the lack of will to fight for their own legitimate rights in spite of their capacity to hard work have appealed to the social sensibility of Mahasweta Devi and she uses her creative potential to promote social awareness about ecology and justice for the marginalized. The present paper analyses her two short stories, Little Ones and Salt as illustrative of her commitment to social justice and protection of environment.

Born on Jan 14, 1926 in pre independent and undivided India; Mahashweta is a witness to the drastic political drastic political fluctuations and changes that transformed the face of the Indian sub-continent. It is impossible to separate the writer from the socio-political economic milieu of the India of the 20th Century. Mahashweta's social and literary activism has touched the sphere of social and political mechanism and she acts as a strong pillar of reform to bring the society in order. The urgency in her writing affects both the sections of the society elite and downtrodden effectively. She wrote plays, text books and children's fiction adopted folklore for young readers, translated works in other languages and did biographies of her own father Manish Ghatak and famous Chinese writer Lu Xun. Her visit to Palamau marked a turning point in her writing career. She called Palamau a "mirror of Tribal India". The Palamau experience brought her face to face with the misery of a people largely excluded from official, mainstream history. While accepting the Ramon Magsaysay award in 1997, she said,

"My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the main stream society from the poor and the deprived. But then why my India alone? As the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our own true faces in the process."

Her words emerge out of the anger at humanities violation, subjugation and exploitation of a large mass of people and voice the injustices done to them over a long period of history. She studied the history of people and wrote about them by examining archival documents; by collecting myths, legends and ballads; and by direct observation in her frequent travelling through the countryside. Voicing the concerns of the excluded subaltern people is a vocation to which she has responded willingly by involved and creative writing. Voice acts as a central phenomenon that brings forth the connecting between the self and the society. “Literary activism is the crux of her writing career and the subaltern metaphor is the core of the her ideological orientation and artistic imagination that pleads for effecting necessary social transformation that would give identity and dignity to the marginalized people. Foucault argued that discourse and power are intimately related because those who have access to voice can wield power within a system. When a social activist gives voice to his/her protest through literature various hidden agendas, motives truths, intentions inordinate ambitions get a proper exposé and in this capacity writer instils knowledge and fear in the audience. It creates a possibility of collective awareness and timely action which might yet help in survival and sustenance of life, both at global and local level. She is “the decolonized native” who fully returns to her own culture and masses, but can eventually can move beyond immediate social context and racial identities. The decolonized native writer is agitated enough to ‘rouse the people’ and has an important role to play in shaping the future, ‘opening up new, unlimited horizons.’”

The story ‘Little Ones’ dealt in the paper has been published in the book ‘Bitter Soil: Stories by Mahasweta Devi’, trans. By Ipsita Chandra. The Focus here will be on the condition of the tribals of Kubha tribe who suffer severely because of the harsh climate and an arid terrain. Lohri is the background of the story. The whole area is deprived even after being rich in natural resources. People are hungry and are left to suffer at the harsh climatic conditions. Though the place is rich in minerals the place is not good for agriculture. The whole place has been described as a lifeless place,

“But the entire area is a burnt-out desert. As if the earth here bears a fire of unbearable heat in her womb. So the trees are stunted, the breast of the river a dried-out cremation ground, the villages dim behind a film of dust. The earth is a strange colour. Even in the land of red earth, such a deep brownish -red is rarely seen.”

The story insists that it is not the people but the circumstances which make people bad and deceptive,

“The Kubha people didn’t know about the bad means of living but they got compelled to turn to the bad ways of living due to hunger and starvation.”

The place so described matches with what the officer thought about the place and people, “it’s damned terrible place. The inhabitants have no honest way of living.” Like Mahasweta Devi, the officer also looks at the place and people as other. They look as if they don’t know about such a place or don’t belong to such a denigrating place but slowly both of them come to learn the reasons of the state.

“Never in his life has he seen such an arid, uninhabitable place. The sight of those who come for relief, the near- naked, shrivelled, worm -ridden, swollen-bellied Adivasi men and women, repels him.”

The current paper deals with the topography of the region and vividly explains that the area is a “burnt- out desert” and the tribals are unable to cultivate the land even if they are provided with the land. Infact it is suggested in the story by BDO to the relief officer that the tribals lack incentives to cultivate the land and so they find reasons to sell it off.

In the beginning of the story, the Aagarian tribe is described as uncivilized or jungle by the government officials. Moreover, from the conversation between BDO and the relief officer we get to know that professionally the tribe were iron miners who have been given barren land for cultivation. Their traditional profession has been taken away from them and forced to work as farmers on barren land. “Lohri is a terrible place. Even if you give those damned people land, they sell it off to the *mahajans*. They stare at you wide-eyed and ask, Where’s the water? Where are the seeds? Plough? Bullocks? How can we farm? Even if you give them all this, they’ll still sell to the Mahajan, saying, What were we to eat until the harvest? So we borrowed money. Now, we’ve sold the land to repay the debt.” The officer and his aide questions the intention of tribal people, “Lohri is a very nasty place. Ten years ago...no,it’s twelve years now...there was a rebellion...fire...scorched everything.” But there is swing which can be seen the mentioned sentence where ‘fire’ has been pointed as a reason of the wasteland. It is presumed and then they are stereotyped as people who are good for nothing. Later on they come to know that they did not want land for irrigation but they wanted food to survive. Whenever *relief* is sent, it gets stolen. Earlier , four or five sacks would go. For the past few years now, it’s been two or three. “Who knows what there is in that soil! Nothing grows there. My nephew tried to farm there, once. Nothing grew. Not paddy, not jowar, not maroa, not bhutta. Strike the earth with a plough, and it’s as if you hit iron beneath the surface. A cursed land.”

The state of land is further explained through an interesting myth of Ashur.

“In Lohri, lived the iron miners, the Aagariya. Legend has it that the Aagariya are of the demon asur clan. Their profession was to mine iron and forge implements. They ate flames, they bathed in rivers of fire, their settlement was Lohri. Their king’s name was Logundih. The asur who lived under the earth allowed only the Aagariya to enter the netherworld and bring back iron. Only the Aagariya.”

The myth explains the fact that only the Aagariya tribe was allowed to bring the natural resources of iron from the mines and no other clan could follow that profession because they were the blessed demons that could combat with fire. But once they fought with the Sun God.

“When Jwalamukhi grew to manhood, he went to battle the sun god. They fought in Lohri, and the fever of their combat burnt the earth. During the battle, Jwalamukhi cursed the sun god- Only when the moon is full will you be able to mate with her. The sun god said_ As foe you Aagariya folk, all the wealth you earn from iron will turn to ashes. From that time the Aagariya has been poor.”

Since then the Aagariya’s fate underwent a transition and they hardly lived from hand to mouth.

“They say they are impure. Lohasur, the patron demon of iron, no longer gives them iron, nor does Koilasur, the demon of coal, allow them any coal. Aagaiyasur , the demon of fire, doesn’t give them fire. But one day, their time will come.”

The fate of Aagariyas and the storyline reflects a strong hope of the underprivileged that one day they will cherish all the natural resources like, iron and coal.

The story has elements of a ghost story and of a social documentary. The current paper emphasises here what lack of nutrition and starvation has done to the human body. Since the 'little ones' described in the story as supernatural kids are in fact the adult Aagariya, shrunk in size.

"Everyone used to say, little boys and girls steal the sacks at night. I thought to myself, *relief* material is usually stolen by those who distribute it. They steal it, sell it off."

In the narrative the Government and their officials are shown as insensitive towards the tribe and their culture. They take over their land in order to extract iron. The blast of the hillock by the officials makes the Aagariyas outrageous. They kill the officials and flee to the dense forest in a way that they are never found. The protest is the result of taking away of the land and the Government reciprocates it by burning down the village and heavily taxing the remaining villages.

The relief officers who come to the villages have a romanticized image of the tribal, "adivasi men play the flute and adivasi women dance with flowers in their hair" They are socially and culturally removed from the actual condition and when they come in contact with it they find it grotesque. The new relief officer, Mr Singh is presented as an honest and sympathetic official, who does everything to help the people. But it is not enough because the people are in this condition due to the negligence, ignorance and insensitivity of the Government officials themselves. "The relief material is usually stolen by those who distribute it. They steal it, sell it off. The *government* knows nothing. Also, Mr Singh wants to amend things but persuading them to convert into agriculturists.

The key issue in this story is deprivation of food such that the village boys are willing to work at the relief camp solely for food and without wages. But the condition of the Kubha tribe who hide in the forest is much worse. They can neither produce within the forest due to the harsh climate and arid terrain nor can they come out as they would be shot dead. Lack of nutrition has made them skinny and shorter in height. It is their undersized physique that makes them resemble a kid. Their demeanour might have changed but the resistance in their gesture makes them seem ghost-like. The Kubha tribe "did not know anything about theft – banditry – robbery" are compelled to resort to these due to hunger and starvation.

"Hunger makes people lose all compassion"

Furthermore the deprived condition of the land has been described as Red in colour because once it had turned out a battlefield in history and now because it lacks fertility.

"See what the trees-land-hills are like! As red as if they're made of copper. This is Lohri. There's poison in the earth here."

The insensitivity of the Government and the officials has been highlighted towards the tribe and their culture.

“We need people to carry water for the camp, to clean up , to wash the vats in which the khichri will be cooked. Go and select ten village boys. Write down their names. They’ll all get work, food, and one rupee as daily wages.

The key concern of the story highlighted in the paper is the deprivation of food so much that the village boys are willing to work at the relief camp solely for food and that too without any wages.

_They ‘ll work for food alone.”

“The scorched-earth-like appearance of the area, its stunted, dusty and leafless jungles, its reddish, cruel hills, all seem to lose their harshness.”

“The three demons, Lohasur, Aagaiyasur and Koilasur, have not blessed them, so the Aagariya are going through hard times now”

Their demeanour might have changed but the resistance in their gesture make them seem ghost- like.

“These are the human children of human beings. Not ghosts, ghosts don’t steal rice and milo. ‘A cursed land’ _who had said that?”

“The moon overhead. How hopeless the moon looks. How feeble the moonlight. In the wasteland burnt by Jwalamukhi’s battle with the sun, the terrible glee of a few adult children. The glee of revenge realized. The glee of hacking off the enemy’s head in revolt.”

The paper thus reveals an unusual narrative which describes the unsettling encounter between the relief officer and the Aagariya tribe in a famine stuck village. The protest is the result of taking away of the land and the Government reciprocates it by burning down the village and heavily taxing the remaining villages. They are in a way socially and culturally removed from the actual condition and when they come in contact with it they find it grotesque.

Mahasweta Devi thus, writes from a subaltern perspective with a strong conviction that all those who write on behalf of the victims of social exploitation fight equally. Her creative enterprise is geared towards making powerful, politically committed statements in favour of the subalterns and thus transforming her literary production from the cliched pieces of art into acts of empowering resistance. Her aesthetics is to be seen keeping in mind that she is a postcolonial women writer working for the tribals and women in particular.

Her aesthetics is deeply implicated in activism, rather it is her activism that becomes the defining principal of her aesthetics; and writing occurs to her as an instrument in her battle against exploitation. Her fiction is never a fantasy nor a pastoral romance rather firmly rooted in ground reality and solidity of facts, it contains certain detailed documentation that goes in to the making of the narrative emphatically suggesting social action even to a causal reader, she creates the effect of documentary realism by repressing reality with precision and economy of detail, using irony and satire and avoiding the romantic cliché. She rejects the stereotype symbols, myths and imagery and her allegorical approach in the narratives, alters the established literary aesthetics. Her fictional art becomes an amalgam of journalistic endeavour, activist intervention and literary creation Gayatri Chakravatri Spivak notes, “Her writing and her activism reflect one another, they are precise that – ‘a folding back upon one another –

reflection in the root sense. ... Indeed, if one reads carefully, one may be seen as the other's difference.”

“Everything begins in history” is Devi's assertion and perhaps this belief motivated her to write and reconstruct the life of the most influential women rebel of the pre-independent India.

Rooted in the Indian rural and tribal society; it is the social problems that are dealt with by the writer and so her works offer a point of discussion to the sociologist political thinkers, economist, philanthropist and administrators. “The post colonial condition is that of being between the spaces languages identities, in perpetual translation and transition between and across languages.

Mahashweta believed in organized group action specially by people who belonged to the marginalized section of the society; for the redressal of the individual problems is not metted by the negligent administrative system. United the common man can bring pressure on the authorities and actively participate in whatever needs to be done for them.

‘Salt’ is the another short story of Mahasweta Devi dealt within the paper. It shows the deep sores of discrimination perpetuating in the society. The opening line of the story startles the readers with its emphatic claim by the Mahajan of killing people not by hand or by any other form of deprivation but by ‘salt’.

“Not By Hand , Or By Bread, nimak se marega_”

In the beginning of the story there is a description of the Adivasi village that is entirely under the control of Uttamchand.

“Jhujhar is an Adivasi village in the lap of the Palamau Reserve Forest. The villagers are allowed to graze cattle and goats in the forest, and pick sticks and twigs off the forest floor for firewood. They can also take leaves to thatch their huts.”

“The Forest Department turns a blind eye. They kill the odd porcupine, rabbit or bird. The census of these forest creatures and birds is not totally accurate. Hence, the Forest Department keeps its eyes shut about this as well. But they rarely manage to anare any meat. Because the animals are now too alert. They can't be trapped easily.”

Uttamchand had always enjoyed a privileged upper position, boasted of his power and knowledge of the outside world and had provided the poor tribals the benefit of accessibility or exposure to the outside world.

“The land, however, belongs to Uttamchand. After the Kol rebellion of 1831, the Hindu traders who re-entered this area were Uttamchand's forefathers.”

“In those days, like today, it was very easy to buy land and drive out the adivasis. Adivasis then were as wary as they are today of accounts- documents- deeds- laws.”

“The village is bound in the shackles of betbegari to Uttamchand“

And now he is denied the luxury of a bonded labourer that his clan enjoyed since ancestral times.

“The only road to Jhujhar village is a footpath. The youth- team came down that path, and noted down the particulars of those families who were doing betbegari to repay debts. Purti Munda was the most vocal personality of the village. He was the only

person in the entire village who had been to Ranchi and Daltonganj, and worked as a coolie in Dhanbad. Since his financial condition remained unchanged, he spat upon the outside world and returned to Jhujhar.”

The tribals engendering in themselves the courage to oppose and go against this practice of free, bonded labour becomes a matter of concern for the landlord and so decides to kill them by stopping the supply of the salt. The non-availability of salt in the only retailer's shop makes the lives of people miserable but still they resist and make efforts to arrange for it.

“These people have been cultivating the land for more than twelve years. They have a right to half the crop.”

Poorti, the tribal youth makes repeated efforts even at the risk of life but all goes in vain.

“Purti just could not explain that their lives were impossible without salt. That their ghato was flavoured with salt alone.”

He desperately attempts to collect the salt that is fed to the wild elephants in the forest reserve.

“In the harvesting season, they try to get salt in exchange for crops. Result- the crop is bartered away for a few handfuls of salt.”

It is beyond general imagination that the cheapest thing cannot be made available to the people of a region.

“The Forest Department hoped that if they built salt licks at different places, and the ekoa visited one, the elephant herd could use another.”

Man stealthily going in the domain of animals for something which is basic for survival is the extremity of sordidness in the lives of the tribals.

“The ekoa was upsetting all calculations. He wandered here and there. Because he was not with the herd, his sense of time was changing, too. He'd turn up at the salt lick at odd hours, not just at dawn or dusk. His nature was changing. Possibly he sensed that salt-earth was being stolen. They begin to lift salt-earth before the elephants come each evening. They have no idea that the ekoa has seen them.”

The resistance yields no results; Poorti and three more tribal youths die and the story ends with the inspector blaming the youths of being selfish, trying to steal a baser thing as salt; causing the animals to suffer.

“If the Forest Department people saw them, they'd nab them as salt- thieves.”

“The scene is symbolic. River, sands, sky, night, Palamau fort in the background, a lonely elephant. An immortal and peaceful picture.”

“Purti and the rest obeyed the village elder. They didn't go to steal salt any more.”

“They died trying to steal salt- earth? Salt-earth?”

“The event makes a short item in the newspapers, and even the Jhujhar villagers turn up to see the dead ekoa. Looking at the elephant, the village elder is dimly aware of the fact that none of this is quite right.”

“All this because of mere salt! They couldn’t get salt. If they could buy salt, three men and one elephant would still be alive.”

“The person who would not sell the salt? Or some other law? Some other system? The law and the system under whose aegis Uttamchand’s refusal to sell salt is not counted as a crime?

“This is not right. He tosses just these few words in the direction of the babus, and then leaves with the other villagers, and , walking single file across the white sands, return to Jhujhar, shaking his head.”

“They will feel at ease only when they return to their own life, a life in which there is no disbelief, no easy explanation for the deaths of Purti and the others, no attempt to deny the reality of their existence with simple explanations. That life.”

Though the resistance in the story meets a tragic end but the keen observation by the author which has exposed the grim reality has a sharp edge. Most of the individual resistances result in failure and do not succeed under the powerful hold of an exploitative system. But the pen of the author is vocal and registers an emphatic protest against the Power that is seen as coercive and traditional to the core believing in mindless domination and destruction of bodies.

Mahashweta thus, has been criticized by literary purists who feel that she is merely a chronicler of social reality. But even a superficial reading of her fiction will establish that this is unjustified as writer when she concerns herself in chronicling the events and realities she side by side provides an insight into human nature, human emotions, human sufferings and reasons behind the sad state of human lives through the representations of the past Mahashweta tries to find its implications and relevance in the present as her writings speak for the rights and privileges of the marginalized and in the process through her literary and social activism. She dares to interrogate the social order and the dominant cultural hold; she possesses the spirit of the fighter who moves on with life, trying to remove hurdles that come on her way of activism. As she says, “... I’m actually very happy with life. I don’t owe anything to anyone, I don’t abide by any rules laid down by the society, I do what I want to, go wherever I want to, write down whatever I like, come around ... Anyway, life has been very much worth living”

Her words, “ I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards the society. Yet I don’t really know why I do these things. The sense of duty is an obsession. I must remain accountable to myself” shows her undeterred commitment towards her activism.

Dr. Nelson Mandela handing her the Jnanpith in Delhi said that she holds a mirror to the conditions of the world as we enter the new millennium.

She is a celebrated icon of the third world literature in the first world academia. Consequently, her secure place in the literary genres of contemporary regional Indian fiction. Third world literature and post colonial writing is beyond question. Academic curriculums in Bangla, English and comparative literature have been unable to ignore the topical relevance of her.

The common message that has been put forth through the medium of this paper is to keep nature in her pristine beauty, let not destroy what we cannot create. The more ecocritical writings will come into focus, the more man will learn to behave with

nature in a proper way keeping in tune with the present environmental crisis. It tells how Environmental justice voiced the weak of the society with an intention to protest against environmental degradation. It is an attempt to expose the faces of the exploiting agencies through the medium of 'Little Ones' and 'Salt' and speaks about the life of struggle of the Dalits and Adivasis to earn a decent livelihood even when they lack natural resources.

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