

**ECOLOGY, WOMEN EXPLOITATION AND SUBALTERN FEMINISM INTERTWINED IN
MAHASWETA DEVI'S 'BREAST-GIVER' AND 'DRAUPADI'**

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi's works are trend breakers in themselves. She is majorly known to give voice to the marginalized tribal people but also she is the voice to all the women facing subordination in the Indian society. But what stands out in her writings is that all the women protagonists that are oppressed and marginalized do not settle for it and instead with their resilience and power to resist stand for what is right. Even in their ordinary life they rise up to become extraordinary. But what is even more explicable is that she not only writes out of concern for gender inequality in men and women but also how nature is exploited. The dualism that allows men to put himself and his culture at the top of the pyramid has left women and nature to become targets of enslavement.

The paper makes an attempt on understanding the dynamic integration of social, economic and environmental resources which need to be fairly allocated within and between the generations. This is required to attain a level of sustainable development both on the basis of gender equality and environmentally friendly growth. Thus, gender equality is not only prerequisite to social development but also is concerned with the environment. This paper thus will bring into light the eco-feminist perspective that directly and indirectly serves as a tool to talk about the marginalized gender of society, i.e., women and how they have been devoid of making any contribution to the progress of society and even if they do the due credit is not provided to them. The patriarchal setup defiles the diversity of gender as well as that of flora and fauna. This hegemony to cater profit to its enterprises thus causes degradation of society and environment.

The paper with references from Mahasweta Devi's works tries to highlight some undisputable connections between the exploitation and misuse of both women and nature. Also, how these women in the effort of freeing themselves also revealed latent potential to rescue environment from the claws of patriarchy and capitalism.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Gender Equality, Patriarchy, Environmental-Friendly, Male/Female Dualisms.

The term Feminism has in the past years taken shape into many other forms. One of which culminated as Eco-feminism. Though it is not very surprising that many people remain unaware to what this term actually conveys because most of them have not understood the true essence of Feminism and what it stands to do in the society. So, this paper takes into consideration to bring a brief about the term eco-feminism and find its traces in Mahasweta Devi's – Breasts stories.

With the growing awareness, human society all over the world has been gripped by Feminism with ecological concerns. With the rising environmental crisis, feminist scholars bridged the gap between feminism and ecology and people then started to reflect upon the similarities between the degradation of environment and abuses or exploitation suffered by women. The integration of these two ideas led to a fully-fledged coined term called eco-feminism. This term now emerges as the idea which talks on the symbiotic relationship between feminists and environmental concerns. "Ecofeminism, is a theory that rests on the basic principle that patriarchal ways are harmful to women, children and other living things" observes Neeru Tandon (Tandon 2008, 56). The patriarchal society has always dominated women and nature to fulfill their greed and needs. Ecofeminists work closely on the theme of how male dominated society has forever treated women and nature with assault and abuse to achieve their own way. According to Neeru Tandon, "Exploitation of nature and women go hand in hand under the system of patriarchy. Nature is being contaminated and spoiled by business and modern technology" (Tandon 2008, 161).

The deeply gendered inequalities have surrounded the socio-economic culture at present times. Thus, a view towards the problems of biodiversity and sustainable development from an eco-feminist perspective is a way out, to look at the representation of women as a marginalized section that has been devoid of the decision making process even for the conservation or strategized use of natural resources. In Indian context the elements of caste, class and gender issues are deeply interlinked with the issues of environment. To address how women strive for equality and for the judicious use of natural resources many works have been done in this field. Mahasweta Devi is one such prolific writer, who has actively written on the subalterns especially subaltern women. Her women characters are portrayed as rebels and in doing so, Devi tries to give voice and perspectives that are often left unspoken or unheard.

'Breast-Giver' and 'Draupadi' are two short stories by Mahasweta Devi from the trilogy of 'Breast Stories'. The similarity that these stories share is how breasts instead of just empowerment are far more used as a symbol to harshly indict the exploitative social system. The stories culminate fully by their end and we find the female protagonists stand up for themselves and also for the nature because though these two are separate entities they are still inter connected.

Jashoda, the female protagonist of the short story 'Breast-Giver' like any other ordinary women took up work as help in a wealthy Haldar family after the untimely accident left her husband crippled. She became the only source of earning for the whole family but only to suffer more. She is sexually abused and morally degraded both when she is declared a thief by the male member of Haldar household and when she is called as 'wet nurse' for her profession of feeding breastmilk to children. She becomes a professional mother who breeds yearly to keep her breasts lactating milk. Thus, she suckles twenty of her own children and thirty children of the family she works for. Unfortunately, because of continuous suckling she is diagnosed with breast cancer and dies a miserable death with no one by her side. The story not only presents oppression women have to face but there are plenty of imageries conjured in the story that show sufferings of women and Mother Nature.

Female characters or women did not have their voice and even if they did it was silenced. Thus, even in the story 'Breast-Giver' Jashoda is a mute character whose only role is to serve her children and husband. Her only identity is – the wife of Kangalicharan. Her present is as vaguer as her past and she only lives to feed her children and satiate Kangalicharan needs. To quote a line from the story that gives a clear picture of what exactly Jashoda lives is "drills her body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil lamp" (38). The very line states how women are treated as mere objects to fulfil men's sexual desires. From this description a clear comparison can be drawn of how women and Earth suffer at the hands of men. Though both are resource giving and life sustaining still they are neglected or ill-treated. The word 'drilling' is just a painful process and has no love or affection to it whatsoever. Men's lust and greed continue to exploit Nature and women and leave them bruised and abused.

The treatment towards women in the male dominated society has always silently told women to bear what may come their way, especially those who belong from poor background. They are forced to surrender to the whims and fancies of the male members of their family or the male gender as a whole even those who are young. As Jashoda comes across this situation where she is raped by her husband and the men of Haldar family, she simply has to endure it for the sake of feeding and caring for her family. Such notions where women have to obey to what they are offered by the patriarchal society has led to men normalizing the abuses on women, even if it's using their body against will. Rape is and has always been used by men as a tool to assert their dominance and power over women more so, on the housemaids. These women are considered to be subservient and are thus vulnerable to all kinds of abuse and invasions of privacy by the male members of the family they work for. Jashoda becomes a character who reflects on the predicament of all housemaids. Rape, here, also becomes a metaphor for abuse on Mother Earth where man turns to ways such as destruction, mining, hunting and other activities that though helps them advance but completely disrupts the ecological balance.

Not only Jashoda, even the daughters-in-law of the Haldar family have no identity and are hardly recognized as members of the family. The role of these six women is to breed children every year thus their presence is marked by their husbands and their lust. Besides this, the women are just passive and powerless creatures only meant to work by the assigned gender roles in the patriarchal society. Thus the two major themes that run in the story are sexual objectification and male libido that have not only caused sufferings to women but also nature and thus stripping off their dignity. Nature and women both are beautiful but both of them have to serve as property to men by which they can fulfill their needs and greed.

Jashoda can be identified with Mother Nature and she herself stands as a symbol of motherhood. Jashoda's desire "to become the earth and to feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest" (46) led her to take breastfeeding as a profession. She tries to find solace in the lap of nature by becoming a mother who nurtured over 50 children just as Nature does. She took over the responsibility for her husband, own children, and the children of others and in doing so the line between Human Mother and Mother Nature is completely diminished. Mother Earth sustains life of planet and Jashoda helps grow the offsprings. She finds her identity in doing things similar to what Nature does. She says, "Does it hurt a tree to bear a fruit?" (Devi 1997, 50) and this question shows her misery. As a tree provides fruits for humans to feed on till it dies, likewise the protagonist feeds the children and cares for them with full dedication and commitment till her health deteriorates and she is left all alone to suffer in pain and die. The metaphors used to describe women as 'nurturing' in all ways bound women and earth and thus are stated as regressive rather than their sole attempt to liberate women. They only reinforce stereotypes. There is symbolism even to the cause of Jashoda's death. Cancer is a disease that not just kills a person it brings a slow death full of pain and miseries. Men's continuous exploitation of Nature too is like dreadful cancer disease that will slowly kill it. Thus, Devi not only brings out the relevance that Jashoda and Nature share, but also she warns that if the problem is not diagnosed and treated then Nature's immature death is imminent as was Jashoda's.

'Draupadi', another short story represents a next level of conflict where 'no virgin' forests are left for the tribal to settle in. The patriarchal commerce enterprises' takeover the natural resources and place from the tribal. This superstructure of hierarchy and dualisms leaves the nature and society as consolidated. Hierarchy often tends to replace diversity and thus allowing women and nature to be overridden by exploitation. The theme of ambivalence between women and nature is invoked through the story. In Draupadi, revolutionaries/tribal who have been wronged find refuge in the darkness of the forests. The "ill-famed forest of Jharkhani" (Devi 1997, 20) is like a labyrinth for the security forces which revolutionaries use to protect not just themselves but also the resources that nature provides them.

Dopdi, the female protagonist of this story stands as a representative of the tribal in this cultural diversity. The diversity both in terms of gender and class/caste is violated by the hegemonizing assault of upper class/caste. It is the sole representation of the inhuman attempt to subdue, assault and control all those that lie beneath in the hierarchy chart.

Dopdi's body becomes a site of both the exertion of repressive power and of gendered resistance. Dopdi chose to seek retribution from the exploitative class by taking a violent path. Her body that is continuously abused by the officials becomes a tool for her to arouse fear in the minds of her assaulters. Her candid reaction to the police fades the male's authority that they showed by attacking on her body. Her refusal to be clothed presents that she dared to step away from the hegemonic patriarchy of the policemen and in doing so she stood against the phallogocentric power and for her body that was brutally exploited.

'Draupadi' is a narrative that stands for the universal portrayal of how women and nature are the most brutal victims of conflict and war. At the end she shows up with her bare body, it becomes a weapon against the violation she faced. "Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (Devi, 402).

The stark reasons for which women are taken advantage of can be summed in the words of Simone de Beauvoir: "In truth women has not been socially emancipated through man's sexual desire and the desire of offspring- which makes the male dependent for satisfaction upon the female." (The Second Sex, 1989: xxvi). In both stories we find that the bodies of women are used by people, especially men to fulfill their needs. Senanayak and his subordinates rape Dopdi again and again for their sexual gratification whereas Jashoda to feed her and her owner's children has to compromise on herself and suffer a painful death.

The tribal society was placed at the bottom that confirmed to the hierarchy chart and thus were homogenized into bonded labourers in plantations and were even criminalized. As goes in the preface by Devi – "the British rulers declared them (the Lodha Shabars) to be "criminal" in 1871. That stigma is still operative..." (Devi 2002, preface ix). Before that, the tribal lived by their own customs and traditions and did not "honour them (the Brahmins)" (121). The women were honored with respectable status and took part in economic activities. But the patriarchal colonizer restricted a woman's role to being a nurturer and provider and clawed her within the homestead, more so their independence was taken away from her to engage in "economic activities". Fire to the fuel was then added by the pre-colonial casteist Indian society. The lower caste/class, and woman became two factors because of which tribal women were then doubly marginalized, they neither had any source of income nor were they given the right to voice themselves. They became more susceptible to poverty and exploitation and were completely devoid of any leisure time.

Our history is marked by many revolutions and movements where women stood both for themselves and Mother Earth. Chipko movement is one such very well-known event that left its imprint on people and saw the active involvement of women. This ecological movement was led by rural women and was done with the effort of protecting the trees and forests from being cut down. Women's protest against all the new developments that led to the destruction of nature in one way or another gave the realization that the fight for liberation cannot be achieved in isolation but from the larger struggle for preservation of nature. As philosopher Karen Warren (1987) puts it: "Ecofeminism builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses, for example – Chipko women – in developing a global perspective on the role of male domination in the exploitation of women and nature. An ecofeminist perspective is thereby . . . structurally pluralistic, inclusivist, and contextualist, emphasizing through concrete example the crucial role context plays in understanding sexist and naturist practice" (151).

Another event that might not have gained much popularity but shows how the patriarchal society always makes an attempt to subdue women in one way or another is the Channar Revolt. In Travancore, modern Kerala, women had to follow a trend where they had to go bare chest in the public. Women from lower caste were not allowed to cover their upper half at all, whereas upper caste women only had to bare their chests in from of priests who were considered God's authority. For lower caste women roaming bare chested was a symbol of respect to higher caste men and if the women disagreed to follow this practice they had to pay "breast tax" which was very high.

Such events remind us that the society continues to find ways to deepen the divisions among people. In order to retain their fortunes, in most cases ways are invented by the wealthy populace that keeps the poor busy and not allowing them to focus on improving their lives.

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