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Deep Ecological Reading of Mahasweta Devi's '*The Book of the Hunter*': An Eco-Conscious Approach

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Abstract

As an esteemed novelist and social activist, Mahasweta Devi is deeply concerned about the state of the environment and how it affects the survival of the human race. As a result, her writings provide enough material for eco-critical analysis. Here we take a look at the book *The Book of the Hunter* and how it includes key elements of Deep Ecology. As a result, this research analyses the book via an ecological lens, focusing on the author's attempts to make readers more environmentally aware.

Keywords: Society, Social, Environment, Ribes, Tribal Life, Self-Sufficient, Exploitation, Human Existence

1. Introduction

For sixty years, Mahasweta Devi has been writing, campaigning, and working tirelessly for the underprivileged. She is the most significant author in this regard. With unwavering dedication throughout her life, she has fulfilled the dual roles of an activist and an author, making her a really unique individual. She is doing good work away from the spotlight, helping those that the government and media are too busy neglecting. Because it shows the reader's own true face, her words are depressing. Devi is well-known for her works that focus on women, dalits, and remote tribal groups in West Bengal. Her laborious Bengali literature often depicts the savage oppression of untouchables and tribal people by ruling upper-caste landowners, politicians, and financiers.

Devi says that her inspiration comes from the common people because she has always believed that regular people are the ones who create history and because she has seen this idea reflected in the many shapes that folklore, mythology, songs, and tales take, passed down through the ages. Devi is a dynamic and fearless character. In India, you'll find six million Adivasis. She began by doing extensive fieldwork in the tribal areas of Orissa, Bengal, and Bihar; later, she turned her attention to authoring novels, short tales, and journalism. Activists, intellectuals, and sensitive writers are the target audience for her work and action. With each piece she composes, her own voice and the voices of the indigenous people blend into one. Who knows? Maybe Devi is writing a short novella or book on India's indigenous people, or maybe a tribal person is penning a massive tome.

Through her literature and social action, Devi has taken up the cause of these evicted tribes. She has spent decades as a journalist, editor, and novelist working with these tribes, all with the intention of improving their terrible situation from the ground up. She discovered an infinite wellspring of literary inspiration among indigenous people. In order to win over her audience, Devi does not paint a false and charming picture of the indigenous people. She goes on to say that the English were to blame for driving the tiny tribesmen out. Criminals were the labels given to the minor tribes by the English.

These tribes were denotified by the Indian government in the 1950s. Devi battles for two West Bengali clans that have been denotified: the Sabars and the Lodhas of Medinapur. Nomadic and Denotified Tribes Rights Action Group

(DNTRAG) was also founded by her. We are well aware that despite the political rhetoric about the advancement of all castes and creeds in free India, the truth is quite different, and this is why the oppression, exploitation, and terrible poverty of tribal people make up the topic of Devi's works.

A number of indigenous communities are adapting well to the so-called modern period. As far as Devi is concerned, indigenous people are similar to an uncharted continent that is about to disappear because of our lack of knowledge about it. They have no idea that slavery is illegal and that India is an independent nation. Writing and activism come together in a special way in Devi. To be sure, her advocacy is always her first priority. She advocates for these tribes' rights via writing and activism. She has gone so far as to try to piece together the tribes' historical roles. The indigenous people's sense of self-worth has always been diminished. Therefore, she decides to take up their cases in the hopes of restoring their former splendor.

The Book of the Hunter is an impassioned plea to restore the Shabars' former greatness, since they have been oppressed for a long time due to their reputation as criminals. One of the most heartbreaking examples of this shame is Chuni Kotal, the first woman to graduate from the Lodhas. She served as the administrator of a women's dormitory after finishing her degree and went on to enroll in a postgraduate anthropology program at Manipur's Vidyasagar University. Because she belongs to the Lodha Shabar caste, which was designated as a "crime prone tribe" in India's Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, she has been subjected to severe harassment and abuse. Her terrible death, the result of persistent persecution, brought the evicted tribes together. The case of Budhan, a Shabar man who was tortured and murdered while in police custody despite having committed no crime, is another illustration of this prejudice and injustice. Devi founded the De-notified and Notified Tribes Rights Action Group in response to the unfortunate tragedy.

2. Literature Review

Shivani, *et al*. (2025) [1] The cultural ideals of the Shabar and the gradual decline of those values are the subject of this article, which analyzes Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter*. The socio-cultural characteristics of the indigenous people are also heavily emphasized. The events and struggles of the sixteenth-century Shabars tribe are the center of attention in *The Book of the Hunter*. Mahasweta Devi makes an effort to show how difficult it is for indigenous people to live in a patriarchal culture.

Noel D., *et al*. (2023) [2] *The Book of the Hunter*, a novella by Mahasweta Devi, delves into the lives of the Shabar people of West Bengal in the sixteenth century. It delves into the rites and practices of the local Brahman and tribal populations, as well as the ways in which they make a living. A person's connection to their home is just as vital as their connection to the natural world. The field of bioregionalism investigates the genuine connection between land and people, with a focus on the need for people to preserve environmentally pleasant areas.

Pachkawade *et al*. (2021) [3]. Here we take a look at the book *The Book of the Hunter* and how it includes key elements of Deep Ecology. Therefore, this research analyses the book from an ecological point of view, looking at the author's attempts to make readers more environmentally aware. The novel traces the lives of three couples: the poet Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti and his wife, the children Kalya and Phuli, and two couples from the Middle Ages. Although Devi acknowledges her debt to Mukundaram's epic poem "Abhayamangal" from 1544, she aims to capture the different socio-cultural conventions of XVI century rural society. Despite this, she offers a significant commentary on the deep-seated, beneficent attitude of the forest-dwelling Shabar community of Odisha and West Bengal towards ecological management.

Jogamaya Bayer. (2018) [4]. Ecological romanticism, both in theory and practice, rejects any discussion of a different kind of modernity. Prasad argues that local traditions should be revised with the aid of a sustainable modernity that operates independently of capitalism. The writings of Mahasweta acknowledge the critical need of maintaining a conversation about a different vision of modernity and assert the right of the indigenous people to participate fairly in the country's prosperity and advancement. As this paper will highlight, Mahasweta's representation places an emphasis on the ecological resistance and fight for basic human rights of the adivasis, reimagining the suffering 'Mother India' (a symbol often used by nationalists) as the crying ‘mother forest' of the tribals. For these people, the nation's freedom is meaningless as long as the forest, who nurture and protect them, is destroyed.

“Dr. Kumari” (2023) [5]. As Devi demonstrates in the book, the so-called contemporary civilized civilization's representatives are barbaric outsiders who violently exploit the tribal community, which is civilized to the core. These modern-day politicians, journalists, entrepreneurs, contractors, and moneylenders have driven the indigenous people to the brink of annihilation with their insatiable desires. This documentary-style book is based on Mahasweta Devi's personal experiences; this paper uses an analysis of the book to highlight the problems with modern society, which, in the sake of progress, brutally exploits indigenous peoples and the environment without regard for either.

3. The Tribal and the Environment: Mahasweta Devi’s Perspective

Even if Dickens despised it, the concept of a "surplus population" was widespread in nineteenth-century England. Literature and other creative forms include ideas, paradigms, and functions about the connection between civilization and the natural world. The conflict between human demands and environmental preservation or the handling of natural changes whose consequences are difficult to predict has been discussed in ancient writings. Over the years, these inquiries have evolved significantly while maintaining strong ties to the specific social and cultural milieus in which they originated. Furthermore, it is evident that literature include non-fictional discussions on the environment. If one applies Ette's notion of "Literature as knowledge for living" to these difficulties, new viewpoints in literary and cultural studies might emerge.

A criticism of civilization, the division between nature and culture, and the dangers of industrialization are all presented in Mahasweta Devi's writings. Her analysis of the interplay between environmental and economic issues is insightful. Artistically, she has a reputation for devoting herself to the

people's history and present-day struggle. The creative writing she does, however, is only a small part of her literary identity. Different but related aspects of her identity include her interests, priorities, and activities. She refuses to be categorized by traditional roles as writer, social activist, journalist, editor, or grassroots group organizer. There is some truth to each of these titles.

These facets of her character, when taken as a whole, set her apart from other women of her time in West Bengal and beyond. Her work as a creative writer is remarkable for the amount and importance of her contributions. Her first-hand understanding of the reality on the ground is the source of her works. Sharecroppers, bonded laborers, contract laborers, miners in West Bengal and Bihar, the landless and tiny peasants, and the exploitation and hardships of these people are some of the many topics covered in her tales. She records the indigenous people's daily lives, rituals, culture, and the challenges they face as a result of modernity out of profound compassion for them. The environmental destruction and government's biased forestry policy that has decimated indigenous peoples' way of life and culture are important themes in her writings. In order to make progress without the ecological destruction that government officials and businessmen are causing, Devi advocates for the notion of sustainable development.

Because she sees a strong link between humans and the natural world, Devi's ecological viewpoint is fundamental to all of her creative work. She thinks that the only way for humans to stay alive is if they stop destroying Mother Earth for their own benefit and start appreciating and protecting her instead. The disturbing rift between humans and the natural world, brought about by various governments' economic policies, privatization initiatives, and globalization, is a theme that runs throughout her literature. She learns that the impoverished tribal and rural women whose livelihoods and basic needs are dependent on trees have been profoundly impacted by the systematic destruction of nature. When it comes to globalization and resource privatization, these marginalized communities are taking a major hit. Devi, in her capacity as a writer, believes that the creative artist is crucial in dismantling the false parts of modern society and assisting in the rebuilding of the society of the future. Devi criticizes the haughtiness and lack of empathy towards social concerns concerning the downtrodden and the disinherited tribal and Dalit people in the author's introduction to Bashai Tudu, which was translated and edited by Samik Bandyopadhyay.

They are claiming the right to exist, but no one is listening, so the paid writer writes narcissistic fantasies about themselves and the middle class and upper class for their benefit. If authors in a nation plagued by social injustice, community strife, and wicked traditions are unable to find inspiration among their own people, what could possibly be more surprising? This callous disregard for human life can only be imagined in a nation like India, which is still reeling from the effects of its past colonial and feudal regimes. Chapter seventeen

Devi feels terrible about the social demotion of the Scheduled Tribes, a group comprising 8.2% of the population of India, the biggest contemporary democracy. The advasis have developed a complex communal-custodial way of life over many generations. Because of the fundamental nature of their environment, they are intrinsically linked to it. Since they do not see nature as a commodity, they have a profound affection for it. Their faith and culture are intricately bound up with the natural world, and they have a firm belief in supernatural abilities. They were really independent "first nations" during the most of the pre-colonial era, and they consistently ran their own governments apart from any one monarch. Their local economy functioned autonomously, free from turmoil. Devi stresses the critical connection between the environment and the cultural and material prosperity of the indigenous people. Their current disadvantaged condition is rooted in the delinking of this relationship caused by neocolonialism, which she acknowledges. As she notes:

Property was meaningless to them. The belief that all people should have equal access to the land, forests, and rivers led to communal landholding practices, similar to those of the Native Americans. Naturally, the mainstream assault shattered their civilization...They have an ecological and environmental understanding that surpasses our own. (Imaginary Maps II, "Author in Conversation" section)

From their huts in the forest to the fields of agriculture and the industrial belts of contemporary India-this is the story of the tribal people in her novels. She teaches us new words related to the Shabar, Munda, Bhil, and Santhal people and their culture.

Unlike in required textbooks, her works devote considerable detail to the history of tribal uprisings. against illustrate the point, the opposition of the adivasi people against the British has never been seen as an aspect of the so-called "national struggle" for independence. The adivasi people rose against the British on many occasions, beginning with the Malpahariya insurrection in 1772 and continuing with Lakshman Naik's revolt in Orissa in 1942. Her works honor the unsung heroes whose names aren't found in history books, such as Rani Luxmi Bai, Birsa Munda, Chotti Munda, and many more. Aranyer Adhikar and Chotti Munda and his Arrow reenact the Munda people's tribal history from the 1800s and 1900s, when the British imperial rule in India was solidifying, resulting in the loss of India's natural riches and the independence of its inhabitants.

4. Mahasweta Devi's '*The Book of the Hunter*': An Eco-Conscious Approach

A growing number of scholars are devoting their attention to ecocritical theory, which emphasizes the connection between literature and the natural world. Ecocriticism, as first defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, is an interdisciplinary field that examines literary works through the lens of environmental concerns and the natural world. According to this school of thought, Nature is crucial to literature because it provides the setting for the creation of fictitious representations via language. Therefore, this theoretical stance is also applicable to and warranted by the literary work under consideration. Environmental literary criticism is a growing field that encompasses a number of subfields, including ecopoetics, green studies, and environmental literature. A healthy biosphere is essential to humanity's survival, and one of its primary goals is to raise awareness of this fact.

Ecofeminism, Ecocide, Deep Ecology, and other subfields reflect the diversity of ecocritical studies. French feminist

Francoise d'Eaunne first used the term "ecofeminism" in 1974 to describe a movement that examines the effects of patriarchal dominance on women and the environment. For the purpose of describing the human-caused degradation of ecosystems, Arthur Galstonin coined the word "Ecocide" in 1950. Killing the environment is the result of nuclear war, toxic chemical spills, and over-depletion of natural resources. In his article "The shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement: A Summary," Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess first used the term "Deep Ecology ". It views all living things—humans included—as part of a logical whole and takes a spiritual, intellectual, and ecological stance.

The core tenet of deep ecology is the need for a shift away from an anthropocentric and toward a biocentric worldview within the environmental movement. Humans, according to anthropocentrism, are at the center of the natural world and, by extension, are better than all other forms of life. When it comes to humans, everything else in nature, including plants, minerals, and animals, is just a resource. A Supreme Being whose Creation is meant for man's exploitation is depicted in several religious texts as God's ultimate work of art, man. Contrarily, biocentrism fervently asserts that every component of Creation is of equal worth. It treats all living things and the natural world surrounding humans with the same degree of significance, rather than fixating on humans and their insatiable wants. It takes a stand against anthropocentrism, the view that the environment should be protected by humans for their own benefit rather than any intrinsic worth it may have.

The extreme ideology known as "Deep Ecology" questions the centrality of humans as the ultimate arbiters of value. In addition, it suggests that our attempts to change the world's ecology are futile since they hurt ourselves. Most prominent among Deep Ecologists are Arne Naess, Bill Devall, and George Sessions. The program's primary goal is to instill in people a sense of ecological awareness that calls for the harmony of all living things on Earth. In the realm of environmental ethics, Deep Ecology is significant both as a philosophical statement and a movement. The aim of this philosophical advocacy is to help people g*et al*ong better with Mother Nature.

Ever mindful of the interdependence between human existence and the natural world, the illustrious writer and social crusader Mahasweta Devi has been honored with several prestigious awards, including the Jnanpith and the Sahitya Akademi award. Natura always plays a supporting or sometimes leading role in her works, and the majority of them include an ecological component. Her lasting interest for the ecology is seen in her significant works such as Aranyer Adhikar (Rights Over the Forest, 1977), Chotti Munda and His Arrow (1980), and several more. She has proposed tribal guardianship of the ecosystem as an example of ethical thought and honorable action towards it.

Thus, many of the problems that we relate to the actual issue of environmental degradation are present in Devi's art. But how can we take Devi's books seriously as accounts of reality when they are clearly products of creative imagination? How much of an impact does the information they provide have on readers' perceptions of actual environmental problems and their ability to take action? To address these questions, I would say that the fictional world Devi created, along with its characters and events, mirror the knowledge of the changing environment as a whole. This allows us to evaluate claims about context, characters, and incidents based on their veracity. The claims she makes in her writing are, therefore, based on reality.

Written in Bengali as Byadhkhanda and translated into English by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta, the novelist's acclaimed 1994 work *The Book of the Hunter* makes her environmentalist stance clear. A tribal people known for their legendary hunting skills and deep appreciation for the natural world, the Shabars, are the primary focus here. It depicts a primitive culture that relies only on the forest for its survival. It also shows how the Shabar people regard and interact with nature, which is very significant.

A primitive people living on the periphery of the rainforest, the Shabar call the woods their home. They forage for food by hunting and selling meat, skins, timber, fruits, roots, and whatever else they may find in the forest. They make sure to purchase the bare essentials for their daily needs. Although they engage in hunting, they do not see it as an act of aggression against other sentient beings. When Mukunda expresses his belief that the hunt is inherently violent, it provides an opportunity to remark expositoryly on the potential hypocrisy of the Shabar mentality (the hunt is not violence). Religion is used by Kalya to counter Mukunda's arguments. The Shabars are descended from the jungle people, and their way of life is based on hunting, which he thinks is a mission from the forest goddess Abhayachandi. But here's the eco-friendly side: they do it in the most altruistic way possible, according to the goddess's precepts, so they never intentionally hurt the forest or its inhabitants. As a result, the ecosystem is never exhausted.

In a number of episodes, this is highlighted. Take the story of Kalya and his friends hunting the King Elephant as an example. An elderly and respected community member named Danko warns them not to kill the elephant if it approaches the Abhayachandi castle. Instead, they should see the elephant's existence as a divine wish. A major religious commandment that prevents the Shabars from harming the environment is that they should just hunt for subsistence, and Danko's warning echoes this principle. So, "Live and let live" is a philosophy they believe in and try to live by.

In a way, Old Danko is a conservation hero and gamekeeper. His knowledge of the theological principles that promote environmental health allows him to report on them. He lives in a rustic cabin in the middle of the forest, strictly adhering to those regulations and sharing his space with creatures like the old python that makes its home in a tree hole. He tends to the elderly python and has excavated many reservoirs to collect water from streams in the jungle so that animals may drink it. Further evidence that non-human creatures have value equal to that of humans is provided by the character Mukunda. Mukunda encounters a young Brahmin weeping over his deceased cow, Kamli, during one of his several treks. He has brought her up as his own kid and is devastated by her untimely passing. From the moment she was a small baby, I took care of raising Kamli. Without her, how am I going to survive? Devi (2002) [6] states on page 49.

Ecocentric principles advocated by Deep Ecology are upheld throughout the book. The following examples show

how theoretically easy it is for Devi to incorporate Deep Ecology ideas into her novel; she does this by providing the reader with softly convincing incidents. The Shabars' usage of water, which is now in short supply, is another case in point. As it winds its way through the woods of Abhayachandi, the Shilai River splits into five separate streams. Only one of the forest's five streams is used by the Shabars; the other three are for use by other animals. The ecosystem will remain unspoiled because they will only use what is necessary. As an example, in the scene when Kalya and Phuli skin a hunting leopard to get the pieces they need, the Shabars are shown as always working in harmony with Nature. After they're done, Kalya hides the corpse in the bushes so that the dogs and jackals may feast on it.

The narrative subtly promotes a cap on human interference with the natural world at every stage. Diversity increases the possibilities of survival, the likelihood of new ways of living, and the diversity of forms, as Arne Naess has said. What we mean when we talk about the "struggle of life" and "survival of the fittest" should really mean the capacity to live in harmony with one another and work together in intricate webs of connections, not the capacity to oppress, abuse, or murder. Environmentally speaking, the idea of "live and let live" is stronger than both of us put together. (page 96, 1973)

It is quite probable that the Shabars, in Devi's portrayal, adhere to the same idea. Despite all the challenges they face, the Shabars manage to find happiness by embracing their surroundings. They see their lack of unnecessary wealth as something the goddess had planned all along. As far as Kalya is concerned, the Shabars were a pre-modern people:

You know another culture, Thakur, and you kill time with books and writings. The Shabars are woodland dwellers that make their home on the outskirts of town! Not only do they not see any money, they have no idea what it is. What other possible ways may Kalketu's kingdom have been betrayed? Money is a mystery to us. So far, all we have is a cowrie, dhebua, or damri coin, which may be either copper or iron. Devi (2002, p. 117) [6] wrote

The Shabars' diet consists mostly of rice with a little salt and pepper added. The Shabars have to rely on what they can find in the forest, such as wild fruits, leaves, vines, snakes, and snails, during the hot summer and rainy seasons when the town people refuse to purchase their meat. They stay warm in the winter without quilts since they don't have homes, instead settling for makeshift dwellings. They get by covering themselves with burlap. However, the forest continues to fulfill all of the Shabars' needs, much like a mother. It is this idea that Tejota expresses:

She is known as a forlorn woodland by some and Abhayachandi by others. Would you agree that the forest is like a mother to us? Everything we need, from honey to medicinal herbs, tubers, flowers, leaves, and even game to hunt, is bestowed upon us by her. She is our mother because she provides for us and ensures our survival. [Devi, 2002, page 73] [6].

In this passage, Tejota states a fundamental principle of Deep Ecology: The interdependence of all living things is basic. Devi subtly urges readers to end humankind's abuse of the planet and instead establish a mutually beneficial connection with it via this figure. Furthermore, the idea that non-industrial civilizations should be shielded from the greedy industrialists is implied. These cultures are the best examples of how to responsibly manage the environment. City walls constructed of bricks heated in furnaces continue to creep into virgin forest area, a fact that is clearly visible. The leader of the town, Bemo Shabar, begs the monarch to put an end to making bricks in the furnace since the fire is cruel to the mud and, by extension, to Mother Earth. Rather of using the furnace, he needs to direct the building of a packed mud wall.

Bemo Shabar's dispute with the monarch exemplifies the Shabar family's rejection of the urban consumer economy's political machine in favor of religious mandates that cater to Nature's demands. The Shabars are descended from the goddess Abhayachandi. Because of his deep compassion for the planet, Bemo Shabar is essentially saying that humans and all other forms of life are interdependent. His main point is that we should fight against environmental devastation not because it's valuable monetarily, but because it's an integral part of who we are. When it declines, we decline with it. In Fox's words,

Ontologically speaking, the realm of existence is one continuous whole. Put another way, there is no actual split in reality between the human and non-human domains, and the universe is not split up into separate subjects and objects. In fact, it is the interactions between things that make up reality. We fail to achieve profound ecological awareness to the degree that we are aware of limits. page 194 (1984)

The Shabars exhibit traits that may be described as bio-empathy throughout the book, and there are plenty of other instances to back this up. The king of the Dhalbhum is approached by a merchant who offers silver coins in exchange for one hundred deer skins for a religious event. However, Kalya turns down the offer since killing the deer during their mating season would result in the curse of Abhaya. Another incident occurred when Kalya's father, Megha Shabar, committed the severe sin of accidentally-or was it on purpose? -killing a pregnant deer. As a result, his own father-in-law stripped him of his profound wisdom and the position of community leader. And according to the rules set down by the former chief of the tribe, Danko Shabar, the father of the bride may only accept one or two wild boars and five deer skins as dowry at a wedding. Due to the fact that such hunts would have eventually depleted the forest, Danko reduced an earlier, heavier amount. So, to keep the ecological balance just right, he advocated for the moderate slaughter of animals. His reasoning for requesting a reduced number is as follows: "You have got a daughter's wedding and she is under Abhaya's protection - what is the point of inviting Ma's curse by killing too many deer, tigers or boars?" "Devi" (2002) [6] states on page 78.

Public procedures established in criminal regulations are ineffective compared to self-regulation by the Shabars, as the narrative implies. Since the Shabars are able to self-regulate, it's safe to assume that they all hold the view that the ecology is best preserved. They believe that non-human matter has rights since it has an existence comparable to human life. In the Phalgun month, for instance, the Sal tree weds the Mohul tree. Shabars spend the whole night dancing and singing under the trees as a way to commemorate the occasion. Some even give trees personalities:

While Mukunda goes out one day, he spots Kalya and Phuli strolling hand in hand, with Phuli's arm around Kalya's waist. The immoral behavior of a wild vine that encircled a Sal tree in the forest echoes in his memory as he deems it a shameful deed. A simple definition of the term "shame" eluded these individuals. They were the offspring of the woodland! A Sal tree was previously encircled by a wild vine, as Mukunda had seen before. These two were unaware of guilt, just as neither the tree nor the vine were. Devi (2002) [6] writes on page 116.

Because mango trees represent life, shelter, and sustenance, every male marries one on the night before the wedding. They are meant to bring forth new life and triumph over death, much like trees.

5. Conclusion

According to *The Book of the Hunter*, if people can let go of their urban hunger and live in harmony with Nature, it will provide for all their basic requirements. However, non-human creatures must be granted the same rights and respect that humans reserve for themselves before this revised view of human existence can be considered appropriate.

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