

A Matter of Concern and a Line of Action: We Matter Too An Ecofeminist Reading of some of Mahasweta Devi's Fiction

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Abstract: Sustainable development entails a dynamic integration of a “responsible” socio-cultural and “environment friendly” economic development. It cannot be achieved without equitable and judicious allocation of resources intra-generationally as well as inter-generationally. Gender equality is therefore a precondition for not just social development but for the protection and conservation of the environment too. However, in the present socio-economic fabric the inequalities are “deeply gendered”. So, a look at the problems of biodiversity and sustainable development from an eco-feminist perspective becomes a tool that enables to bring into the mainstream the women who are marginalized from contributing to the decision-making processes relating to the sustainable use of our natural resources.

The androcentric thought process that dominates our life always uses the narrative of dualism and hierarchy to construct definitions of society and nature. This dualism places man and his “culture” at the seat of power while women and nature are entrapped below them as objects of exploitation. The patriarchal commercial hegemony defiles the diversity existing in nature – the diversity of gender and flora and fauna. The diversity that deserves equity is marginalized and homogenized to serve their profit making enterprises causing a degradation of society and denudation of our environment. A wake up call must be sounded and so I shall try to ring the bells of ecofeminism, with special reference to some of the works by Mahasweta Devi, to highlight how the domination and exploitation of both women and nature have undisputable connections and the latent potential of these marginalized women to contribute towards sustainable development rescuing the environment from the fatal clutches of the blatant snobbery of the masculine “methods and attitudes” which has cost us much socio-culturally, economically and ecologically.

Sustainable development entails a dynamic integration of a “responsible” socio-cultural and “environment friendly” economic development (Koparanova and Warth, p 6). It cannot be achieved without equitable and judicious allocation of resources intra-generationally as well as inter-generationally. Gender equality is therefore a precondition for not just social development but for the protection and conservation of the environment too. However, in the present socio-economic fabric the inequalities are “deeply gendered” (ibid, p 10). So, a look at the problems of biodiversity and sustainable development from an eco-feminist perspective becomes a tool that enables to bring into the mainstream the women who are marginalized from contributing to the decision-making processes relating to the sustainable use of our natural resources. In this paper I would like to highlight the importance of integrating gender equality with the objectives of environmental protection and sustainable development through the short-stories *Draupadi* and *Duoloti, the Bountiful* and the novel *The Book of the Hunter* by Mahasweta Devi.

The novel and the short-stories must be looked at in their historicity. The novel is set in sixteenth century Bengal. Chandi Bon, the forest, where the Shabars, in the novel, live, and their way of life is being slowly encroached by the town of Ararha. The hunter/tribal community of the Shabars is juxtaposed with the “civilized” brahmanical life of the family of Mukundaram to underscore the differences in the customs, rules and ways of life of the two communities/castes. The Shabars practically live off whatever the forest, the Mother, provides them with. “They don’t know what money is, nor do they see much of it” (Devi: 2002, p 117). It is a world where gender equity exists along with the understanding of sustainable use of the forest resources. Tejota, the daughter of Danku, the chief of the Shabars, to who was passed down the wisdom and knowledge of the secrets of Abhaya, unites the two ideas of gender equity and environmental sustainability when she reprimands her son, Kalya, for beating his wife Phuli. She says, “Why won’t you learn lessons from the forest even now? Do the tigers and deer thrash their females mercilessly like you do yours? ...When a tiger is hungry, it kills a deer; an elephant eats leaves and twigs from the bamboo and the banyan tree, but there is no needless killing, violence, or destruction” (ibid. p.100). The “inviolable” unwritten rules of Abhayachandi ensure that knowledge of her secrets is not gendered but passed on to the one who deserves them. Hence, Tejota and not Megha, her husband, inherits the wisdom from her father for Megha has “sinned” by killing, knowingly or unknowingly, a pregnant deer. Some environmentalists accord to this primeval way of life a sense of utopia. However, we must not be carried away by this image of the Abhayachandi, the Mother, who protects her creatures: men, women and flora and fauna, within her bosom and blesses them with fearlessness even in the

wilderness. The raising of a woman to the pedestal of the Mother Goddess has severe implications for the freedom of a woman. Tejota did not ask for the knowledge; it was handed down to her by the patriarch, Danku, and it exacted from her the price of sacrificing her own desires and needs to be the ideal bearer of the wisdom. Phuli, too, is bound by the commands and whims of her husband, Kalya. No matter what little she earns by selling her wares, Phuli has to meet the demands of her husband for rice and other foods. Her desire for the female companionship of Jagadishwari, the Brahman wife, is crushed by Kalya's unreasonable hatred for Brahmans. Motherhood becomes the only way for Phuli to protect herself from the violence inflicted by Kalya: "He's not beating me these days. I'll tell him when he comes to thrash me" (ibid. p 123).

The invasion of the town civilization is inevitably taking over life in Chandi Bon; its "foul" (ibid. p 67) influence is clearly visible and is threatening the life of the Shabars. "Sana's family had learned to save", Phuli's "eyes would be dazzled by the houses of other peoples" (ibid. p 122) and "Kalya's generation was raised on rice! He only knows how to beat Phuli for it" (ibid. p 106). Danku's desperate search for the magical herb that will reinvigorate him so that he can take a wife and procreate to ensure the continuation of the Shabar way of life – an unreasonable, untenable idea that endangers the sustainability of environment by misbalancing the population to resources ratio and Kalya's unwarranted aggression in his demand for the knowledge from Tejota, in his desire to be king of the Shabars and against the towns people and Brahmans, are all masculine reactions to the conflict between the indigenous way of life of the hunters/tribals and the ever encroaching town civilization. It is informed by the masculine mentality of domination and hierarchy rather than the ideals of diversity and equity. It refuses to accept the fact that with rapidly changing times interdependence of communities is inescapable – "Where else does a Shabar go but to town to sell meat, skins, bird feathers, resin, honey, fruits and tubers? Who else would buy such things except a town-dweller? If we don't sell our wares, we can't get rice to eat" (ibid. p106).

Throughout the novel it is the community of women that implicitly proposes a viable solution to the dualistic conflict. They act as active "agents of change" (Koparanova and Warth, p11). The boundaries become blurred as women of different castes interact and empathize with each other while Tejota is respected and sought for advice by all and sundry. The tribal women mediate between their life in the forest and their dependence on the town-dwellers to fulfil their roles as providers while Daibaki takes upon herself to look after the family when her husband and elder son confine themselves to the pursuit of Brahmanical knowledge. Again, it is Tejota's narration to Mukundaram that ensures the passing on of the story of the life and customs of the Shabars to posterity before they "take down our houses and pick up and leave" (Devi: 2002, p.100).

The short-stories, *Draupadi* and *Duoloti, the Bountiful*, represent the next stage of the conflict wherein no more "virgin" forests are left for the tribals to settle anew in. With the patriarchal commercial enterprises' takeover of the indigenous way of life of the tribals and their forest resources, the superstructure of the dualistic and hierarchical narrative of society and nature is consolidated. Diversity is replaced by hierarchy and intrinsic values of nature and women are overridden by their exploitability. The premonition in *The Book of the Hunter* has become a reality as the corporate "savages" waged the war of aggressive conquest, possession and control of women and the Nature. Denied empowerment by deficiency of knowledge and inequitable ownership and distribution of resources, the potential agents of change are, now, not just representatives of the denuded, dismembered and degraded forests but themselves sites of exploitation.

Environmentalists like Vandana Shiva refer to the idea of development that we have borrowed from the West as "maldevelopment" (Kaur, p 388) because they more often than not involve and encourage violence against the local environment and women. Duoloti, is in fact, a part of the gangrenous consequences of such "maldevelopment". The same commercial entrepreneurs abuse her for pleasure who exploit the forest resources for profit.

The diseased and degraded Duoloti does not have the home in the forest to go back to, but just the memory of the banyan tree – the forest, too, has been denuded. The venereal disease that Duoloti dies suffering is the fatal infection of discrimination and exploitation that the tribals face. She and her father, Nagesia Crook's, dismembered body are symbolic of the dismembered tribal society and their muffled voices denying them the right to seek justice for the cruelty unleashed upon them.

In *Duoloti, the Bountiful*, the earth is represented as a caring mother, a "quintessential" attribute of the feminine. However, it will be wrong to read too much of Vandana Shiva's theory of ecofeminism in it. Vandana Shiva talks of nature in the reductionist terms of "Aranyani" (Epic Struggle.. P.129) or mother goddess, and accords the highest value of "cultural evolution" (P129) to the Brahmanic way of life when the Brahmans lived in the forests as ascetics and composed the Vedas. This is in total disregard for the primeval tribal way of life in the forests. On the contrary, in the stories of *Duoloti, the Bountiful*, and *The Book of the Hunter*, it is a Brahman who brings the downfall of both Duoloti and the Shabars. Ambivalence is what underlies the relationship between women and nature. This is what Mahasweta Devi invokes in the novel, *The Book of the Hunter*, and the short-story, *Draupadi*. In the novel, the forest, Abhayachandi, is the Mother that gives but also taketh away when her rules are violated. The Shabars not being allowed to go beyond a certain point into the forest, the

shroud of secrecy that envelopes the forest, the unwritten laws that must not be violated – all these signify a darker, unknowable, unreachable character of the forest. She is not the ever “for-giving” mother but an entity that can punish severely when not respected. In a different context, in *Draupadi*, the forest is a dark place of refuge for the revolutionaries/tribals who have been wronged. The “ill-famed forest of Jharkhani” (Devi: 1997, p 20) is like a labyrinth for the security forces into which the revolutionaries disappear after attacking them.

The two women, Duoloti and Dopdi, are representatives of the cultural diversity that the tribals stand for, in India. The inhuman attempt of subdue and control them by the upper caste/class, shows the homogenizing assault that desecrates this diversity, both in terms of gender and caste/class. In *Duoloti, the Bountiful*, Duoloti is obedient to the point of causing her own downfall. She does not revolt. Dopdi, on the other hand, takes up a violent path to seek retribution from the exploitative class. Her mangled breasts, her wounded vagina, as the “moon vomits” (ibid. p 35) revolted by the sight of her dehumanized body, which now just breathes like the rise and fall of a “piston” (ibid. p 36), are a site of a revolt. She uses her body as a way of resistance just as the women did in the Chipko movement. Denuded, she now challenges the senanayak to clothe her again. She spits out blood at his “white bush shirt” (ibid. p 37) just as the denuded earth spits out wrath on the humans, trembling in anger and agony.

The androcentric thought process that dominates our life always uses the narrative of dualism and hierarchy to construct definitions of society and nature. This dualism places man and his “culture” at the seat of power while women and nature are entrapped below them as objects of exploitation. The patriarchal commercial hegemony defiles the diversity existing in nature – the diversity of gender and flora and fauna. The diversity that deserves equity is marginalized and homogenized to serve their profit making enterprises causing a degradation of society and denudation of our environment. It is important to trace back this discourse of dominance and control to the colonial and pre-colonial era. The colonizers flouted the Indian way of life that was harmonious with nature. They took upon themselves the work of “civilizing the heathens” and popularized an alien idea of development. The tribal society with all its equity and diversity was forced to confirm to a hierarchy that placed them at the bottom, homogenized into bonded labourers in plantations and even criminalized them – “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 tribals lived by their own customs and traditions and did not “honour them (the Brahmans)” (ibid. p 121). Their women enjoyed respectable status and took part in economic activities. But the patriarchal colonizer defined a woman’s role as the nurturer and provider, confined her within the homestead and slowly took away from her the independence to engage in ‘economic activities’. The pre-colonial casteist Indian society added fire to the fuel. A tribal woman now became doubly marginalized – a vulnerable women with no income so to speak of, that too of a lower caste/class. In spite of working more with no leisure time, a woman became more susceptible to poverty and exploitation. Even after India’s independence from the colonizers a new kind of colonialism continued to pervade the whole human society – internal colonialism, signified by Duoloti’s tragic death on the fifteenth of August, India’s Independence Day.

The patriarchal institutions of governance and decision making do not offer equitable opportunity to women by denying them capacity and skill development opportunities, and by being ceaselessly careless about the huge gap in the access to knowledge, information and financial aid to women that will enable them to implement necessary actions for sustainable development. Ignorance of the masculine intellect in regard to the negative impact, that too a majority of it, that environmental degradation has on women has made it alarmingly imperative to take women on board in the decision making processes and help them fulfil their roles as efficient managers of natural resources.

Ecofeminism draws a parallel between the exploitation and degradation of women and nature. It emphasizes the fact that sustainable development and conservation of biodiversity is not possible without ensuring an education and understanding by all the people of gender issues. Such an education will help them break away from stereotypes and “develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge to make informed decisions for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future and to act upon these decisions” (Koparanova and Warth, p 17). A revision of the measures taken so far for sustainable development and biodiversity conservation, is, therefore, crucial. Where exploitation has been carried out in a top-down fashion, conservation must be implemented in a bottom-up manner. This will guarantee an inclusive exercise where the marginalized sections will be given a priority in the process of policy making, and a fair chance to undo the injustice meted out to them for so long.

The Book of the Hunter and Draupadi are palimpsests that reorient our perspectives on the questions of gender and environment. It signifies women’s fight for the symbiotic existence of diversity. Writing, especially by a woman, becomes significant as a tool and also as an agency to voice the demand for gender sensitive education and policies and programmes, for a supportive environment that includes removal of barriers and ensures rewards, and for full participation in decision and strategy making at both micro and macro levels. A woman can provide an insider’s point of view both in terms of a marginalized class/caste and gender and hence,

provide a better alternative than straightforward conservation which may, in fact, threaten the closure of the sources of fulfilling the needs of the tribals and cause a indigenous way of life that relied on and thus, possessed the knowledge and skill for conservation of biodiversity and sustainable development to disappear.

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