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

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Abstract

Deep Ecology is one of the newly emerging areas in ecocritical studies. Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess has coined the word in order to promote ecological consciousness and encourage a feeling of shared identity between humans and the biosphere. Studies in Deep Ecology propose that the human being is just one more among the many species in nature, and not *the* supreme one; the belief that humanity is somehow exceptional is swiftly leading us towards the anthropogenic depletion of the environment. Mahasweta Devi, a well-respected author and social activist, shows great concern for the health of the ecosystem and its importance for the continuity of the human species, to the extent that a significant amount of her work can be used as apposite study material for eco-critical analysis. The novel considered here, *The Book of The Hunter*, incorporates salient features of the concept of Deep Ecology. Consequently, the present study reviews the novel with an ecological perspective, all the while discussing the author's efforts to create eco-consciousness among the readers. The story follows the lives of two couples, the medieval poet Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti and his wife, and the youngsters Kalya and Phuli. While the novelist aims to capture the different socio-cultural conventions of XVI century rural society (in this Devi acknowledges her debt to Mukundaram's 1544 epic poem "Abhayamangal"), she nonetheless offers a significant commentary on the deep-seated, beneficent attitude of the forest-dwelling Shabar community of Odisha and West Bengal towards ecological management. At the same time, the author illustrates the effects of the growing number of settlements encroaching upon the forest.

Keywords: deep ecology, ecocide, Ecocritical Theory, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, Mahasweta Devi

Ecocritical Theory, which focuses on the relationship between the natural environment and literature, is presently receiving attention from an increasing number of researchers. Ecocriticism, first explained by Cheryll Glotfelty, is interdisciplinary and interprets the works of novelists and poets in the context of Nature and of issues related to the environment. This theory posits that Nature plays an important role in literature, as Nature provides much of the context where language can produce fictional representation. Consequently, the literary work can and should be analysed from this theoretical standpoint as well. Also known as Environmental Literary Criticism, Green Studies and Ecopoetics, it is a broad concept that is becoming popular among critics. One of its main objectives is to create consciousness about the irreplaceable place of a healthy biosphere in the future of humankind.

There are various strands and sub-fields in ecocritical studies, with disciplines such as Ecofeminism, Ecocide, Deep Ecology, etc. Ecofeminism, the word coined by French feminist Francoise d'Eaunne in 1974, studies the connection between women and Nature and is built on the analysis of how patriarchal domination affects both. Arthur Galstonin introduced the term Ecocide in 1950, referring to the destruction of the natural environment by human activity. Nuclear war, the dumping of harmful chemicals and the excessive exploitation of natural resources lead to ecocide. Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the phrase "Deep Ecology" in his work "The shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement: A Summary". It has an ecological, philosophical and spiritual approach and considers humans, plants, animals and the Earth as a rational whole.

Deep ecology is conceived on the idea that the environmental movement must develop a biocentric perspective instead of an anthropocentric one. Anthropocentrism considers human beings as the centre, the most important element in nature, superior to all other living creatures. All other entities in nature like animals, plants and minerals are considered resources, meant for exploitation by human beings. In many religious scriptures man is presented as the ultimate handiwork of the God, a Supreme Being whose Creation is intended for exploitation by man. On the other hand, biocentrism strongly proposes that all the elements in Creation have equal value. Instead of an excessive focus on the human being and his never satisfied needs, it gives equal importance to all other living beings and natural objects around him. It opposes the anthropocentrism that asserts that the human being should preserve the environment not for its own sake, but for its exploitable value.

Literature Review

Arne Naess in his epoch-making work "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary" (1973), introduced the term deep ecology and established the difference between ecology and deep ecology. The former focuses on the problems related to the environment and the latter promotes ecological consciousness. He criticizes man's disregard for his dependence on nature and his exploitation of the environment as one would a slave. Warwick Fox, in his "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy for Our Time?" (1984), has called attention to the fact that the world is a single entity, and that human activity that disregards this fact and greedily destroys the environment will eventually contribute to the demise of human beings.

In their famous work "Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered "(1985), Bill Devall and George Sessions give an insight into the concept of deep ecology by focusing on its two fundamental tenets: Self-Realization and Biocentric Egalitarianism. Self-Realization implies that the human being is interconnected with the rest of nature; it is self-identification through

our shared identity with the total ecosphere around us. Biocentric egalitarianism suggests that all living things are equal members of an interconnected whole whose elements have equal intrinsic worth. John O'Neill in 'The Varieties of Intrinsic Value' (1992) describes three varieties of intrinsic value in non-human beings and non-beings in the natural world. First, non-instrumental value; second, intrinsic properties; and finally, "objective value". The concepts discussed in these analyses about the relationship between nature and human beings provide a relevant framework for the deep ecological reading of the select fictional work of Mahasweta Devi.

Discussion and Analysis

Deep Ecology is a radical movement that challenges the belief that human beings are the measure of all things. Moreover, it proposes that our endeavours to alter the global ecosystem are pointless, as they are self-harming activities. Arne Naess, Bill Devall and George Sessions are the main exponents of the Deep Ecological Movement. It focuses on creating an ecological consciousness that demands the unity of humans, plants, animals and the Earth. Deep Ecology plays an important role as a philosophical thesis and as a movement in the field of environmental ethics. As philosophical advocacy, its goal is the improvement of human relations with Nature.

Mahasweta Devi, a prolific writer, social activist and recipient of many notable accolades like the Jnanpith and Sahitya Akademi award, shows constant concern for Nature and its intimate relationship with human life. Most of her work has an ecological dimension and Nature is always a background and protagonist. Her major works like *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights Over the Forest, 1977), *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (1980) and many others show her enduring concern for the ecosystem and proposes tribal guardianship of it as an exemplar for ethical thinking and honourable behaviour towards it.

Accordingly, many of the issues that we associate with the real-world problem of environmental depletion are manifest in Devi's work. Yet given the fact that Devi's novels are works of artistic imagination, in what sense can they be interpreted as faithful representations of reality? To what extent does the information they offer influence readers' judgments about real-world ecological issues and stage a call for action? I'd answer these questions by saying that the fictional world constructed by Devi, its characters and events, reflect the overall inventory of what is known about the changing environment, so that statements about context, characters and incidents can be appraised with respect to truth and falsehood. Thus, such statements as appear in her work have truth value.

The novelist's standpoint with regard to the ecosystem is apparent in her celebrated 1994 novel *The Book of the Hunter*, originally written in Bengali as Byadhkhanda and subsequently translated into English by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta. Outwardly, the main concern is to make the reader aware of the history of a tribal community, the Shabars, who are famous hunters and great lovers of nature. It features a simple way of life that is totally dependent on the forest in which they live. More importantly, it depicts the relationship of the Shabar community with Nature and their great respect for their environment.

The Shabar is a forest-dwelling tribal community living on the outskirts of the jungle. They hunt, sell meat and skins as well as wood, fruits, roots and whatever they can easily obtain from the forest. They buy the minimum basics that they require to live. Though they hunt, they don't consider it a violence against fellow living creatures. Expository comments regarding the

possible duplicity of the Shabar mindset (the hunt is not violence) are made when the character Mukunda articulates his conviction that the hunt, by its very nature, is violence. Kalya opposes Mukunda's arguments using religion. He believes that the hunt is the work assigned to them by the forest goddess Abhayachandi: the Shabars are the children of jungle and their livelihood depends on hunting in their environment. But here is the environmentally-conscious angle: they do it as benevolently as possible by following all the rules set for them by the goddess and never consciously harm the jungle nor the animals therein. The environment, thus, is never depleted.

This point is brought to the fore in various episodes. For example, while Kalya and his companions are hunting the King Elephant, Danko, an old and respected member of the community, tells them that if the elephant goes near the fortress of Abhayachandi they must not kill him: they must consider his survival as the goddess's desire. Danko's admonition reflects the religious precepts that keep the Shabars from hurting the ecosystem, with the prime directive being that they should only hunt for their livelihood. Thus, they believe in and follow the principle of "Live and let live".

Old Danko is an ecological hero/gamekeeper of sorts. He knows and reports on the religious tenets that keep the environment healthy. He himself follows those rules to the letter, living deep in the forest in a wooden hut with neighbours such as the aged python that dwells in the hollow of a tree. He cares for the old python and has dug many reservoirs to capture water from forest streams for creatures to drink. The character Mukunda also reinforces the idea that other beings are as important as humans. During one of his many his journeys, Mukunda meets a young Brahmin crying for Kamli, his dead cow. He has raised her as his own child and cannot bear her sudden death, finding it very difficult to live without her. "I raised Kamli from the time that she was a tiny little thing.... How can I live without her?" (Devi, 2002, p. 49).

At every step the novel promotes the ecocentric ideas fostered by Deep Ecology. As we can observe in the examples above, Devi's insertion of Deep Ecology principles into her story is conceptually simple, as it offers gently persuasive episodes to the reader. Another example is the Shabars' use of a resource that is being depleted at present: water. The water of the Shilai River flows through Abhayachandi's forest and is divided into five streams. The Shabars use only one stream and the other four are reserved for *the other* animals in the forest. They will exploit only their part and keep the environment wholesome. This reflects the fact that every action by the Shabars is offered in the novel as being in concert with Nature, as in the episode where Kalya and Phuli skin a hunted leopard and collect the body parts that they need. When they are finished, Kalya places the remaining carcass in the bushes for dogs and jackals to eat.

At every turn the story gently advocates for a limit to human exploitation of the environment. As Arne Naess has stated,

> Diversity enhances the potentialities of survival, the chances of new modes of life, the richness of forms. And the so-called struggle of life, and survival of the fittest, should be interpreted in the sense of ability to coexist and cooperate in complex relationships, rather than ability to kill, exploit, and suppress. "Live and let live" is a more powerful ecological principle than either you or me. (1973, p. 96)

The Shabars, as they are portrayed by Devi, undoubtedly follow this same principle. Though the Shabars do experience many difficulties, they live happily within the limits of their

environment. They have accepted their lack of superfluous affluence as a fate destined by the goddess. To this point, Kalya describes the Shabars as a pre-modern people:

> Look Thakur, you pass time with books and manuscripts and you know a different community. The Shabars are residents of the forest; they live at the edge of town! They don't know what money is, nor do they see much of it. How else do you think Kalketu could have lost his kingdom? We don't understand money. A cowrie or a dhebua or damri - copper or iron coin is as far as we go. (Devi, 2002, p. 117)

The Shabars eat very simple food like rice, seasoning it with salt and pepper. When the town dwellers don't buy meat from Shabars in the hot summer and rainy season, Shabars have to survive on what they obtain from the forest, like wild fruits, leaves, vines, snakes and snails. They don't have proper houses, but live in small huts, while in winter they don't have the quilts to protect them from the cold. They make due by wrapping their bodies with burlap. But still, for the Shabars the forest is like a mother that meets all their needs. The character Tejota articulates this belief:

> Some call her Abhayachandi and others call her a desolate forest. The forest itself is our mother, what do you say? She gives us fruits, flowers, tubers, leaves, wood, honey, medicine herbs, leaves and roots, even animals to hunt. She gives us everything, keeps us alive, doesn't that make her our mother? (Devi, 2002, p. 73)

Here Tejota articulates a standard Deep Ecology tenet: All life forms have a fundamental interconnectedness. Through this character, Devi gently persuades readers that we need to stop human exploitation of the biosphere and generate a symbiotic relationship with it. There is also an indirect endorsement of the need to protect non-industrial cultures (who are exemplars of the beneficial stewardship of the biosphere) from the invasion of industrial greed. This is observed as the city walls, made of furnace-burnt bricks, keep encroaching upon pristine forest lands. Bemo Shabar, the community's chief, suggests the king stop the manufacture of bricks using the furnace, as its fire causes pain to the mud and, therefore, torments Mother Earth. He should instead order the construction of a packed mud wall without the use of the furnace.

Bemo Shabar's disagreement with the king shows that the Shabars have no affiliation with the political machine that has been created by urban, consumer economies, but rather, as the children of goddess Abhayachandi, they follow religious directives that serve the needs of Nature. Through his profound empathy for Mother Earth, Bemo Shabar is basically asserting that there are no boundaries between human beings and the rest of creation, as the world is fundamentally one. He essentially argues that the destruction of the natural world must be opposed not because of its monetary value, but because it is part of our wider self. Its diminishment is our own diminishment. As Fox puts it,

> "... there are no ontological divides in the field of existence. In other words, the world is simply not divided up into independent subjects and objects, nor is there any bifurcation in reality between the human and non-human realms. Rather, all realities are constituted by their relationships. To the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness." (1984, p. 194)

Throughout the novel, the Shabars display what might be called bio-empathy, and many more examples can be brought to prove the point. When a trader requests a hundred skins of male deer for the king of the Dhalbhum for a religious ceremony, offering silver coins for them,

Kalya refuses the offer because it is the deers' mating period and killing them at this point will bring Abhaya's curse upon them. In another instance, Megha Shabar, who is Kalya's father, unintentionally (or was it intentionally?) killed a pregnant deer, an act that was considered a great sin for which he was denied great knowledge and the leadership of the community by his own father-in-law. Furthermore, Danko Shabar, the previous head of the community, ruled that during a wedding only five deer skins and one or two wild boars could be taken as dowry by the bride's father. Danko lessened an earlier, heftier quantity because such hunts would have ultimately exhausted the forest. Thus, he promoted the limited killing of animals in order to maintain an apposite balance in the ecosystem. To convince the family to accept the smaller quantity, he tells them: "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, p.78).

As the story suggests, self-regulation by the Shabars is much more effective than public protocols set in penal codes. Self-regulation means that a shared mindset and a consensus exists among the Shabars that favours the maintenance of the ecosystem. For them, substance in non-human form enjoys an existence that is analogous to human existence and is worthy of rights. The Sal tree, for example, marries the Mohul tree in the month of Phalgun. To celebrate the event, Shabars dance and sing around the trees all night long. Trees are even personified: One day Mukunda sees Kalya and Phuli walking together with her arm around his waist. He finds it a shameless act that reminds him of the immoral actions of a wild vine that wrapped itself around a Sal tree in the forest. "These people didn't even know the meaning of the word 'shame'. They were the forest's progeny! Mukunda had once seen a wild vine wrapped around a Sal tree. Neither the tree nor the vine knew shame, and nor did these two." (Devi, 2002, p. 116).

Moreover, on the eve of the wedding every boy marries a mango tree, as the tree is a symbol of life, shelter and nourishment. Like trees they are also supposed to create new lives and be victorious over death.

> On the eve of the wedding, all the girls walked around a mahua tree seven times and every boy 'married' a mango tree. Why this 'tree wedding'? So you could become givers of life, shelter and nourishment like the trees. So you could be victorious over death, like a tree. A tree creates new trees through its seeds, and lives on through them. The same way, you lived on through your progeny. (Devi, 2002, p. 131)

Like *other* animals in nature, they also have equal rights for males and females. They can marry whomever they want, during quarrel a husband may thrash his wife, while in return she can do the same to him. Men and women can divorce and remarry. They follow nature and set their rules by it. Tejota, as head of the community, uses her knowledge of forest herbs and plants for preparing medicines. She comments different animals that are satisfied with the limited resources of the environment: "Look at the kingdom of animals and birds! 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" (Devi, 2002, p. 100). The Shabars don't farm and they are not allowed to till the soil, so to obtain rice they have to sell meat, skins, bird feathers, resin and honey to the town dwellers. Shabar men are not permitted to sell these items, only the women. They are prohibited from using metal jewellery, and can use only natural things as ornaments.

As growing urban civilizations flourish, they impel human beings to exploit nature beyond any reasonable limit. Increasing industrialization, pollution and deforestation blind the human being to the rights of non-human entities, turning them into a thing that is intended for use. Only humans have rights. Unfortunately, regular contact with the town people began to change Shabar lifestyle. They turned their huts into houses with smooth mud walls with painted pictures and a hay roof. They began to earn more money and use it for luxuries like rice, oil, ointments and metal jewellery which were heretofore prohibited to the Shabars. Tejota realizes that this encroachment of the town culture in the simple, natural life of the Shabars will threaten their way of life. (Devi, 2002, p. 122). As the town of Ararha encroaches upon the forest, the Shabars begin to leave the forest and move elsewhere. Tejota explains: "... a Shabar is corrupted by living near a town. What will I do? A Shabar is where the jungle is. If the town of Ararha advances further, we'll take down our houses and pick up and leave." (Devi, 2002, p. 100). She then shares her concern with her father: "But the town keeps advancing! New neighbourhoods everywhere! The city's influencing our community and it frightens me, Baba!" (Devi, 2002, p.105) As many species begin to die off, Tejota is afraid that in due course of time the Shabars also will meet the same fate. Some of them, attracted by the luxurious life of the town, decide to settle there.

Conclusion

Many Deep Ecology principles and ideas are skilfully interwoven into this novel. By describing the life of Shabars at length, Mahasweta Devi has intended to foster ecological consciousness among the readers. The story creates an awareness of the serious threats posed by unrelenting urbanization. The author explains her concerns in the novel's preface: "The encroachment of towns and non-adivasis upon their territory, adivasis abandoning their lands and going away, the heartless destruction of forests, the search of the forest children for a forest home, and the profound ignorance of mainstream people about adivasi society- these are all truths about our time." (Devi, xi).

The Book of the Hunter suggests that generous Nature can fulfil all the primary needs of human beings, and lacking urban greed, they may just be able to live happily. But this new conception of human existence can only proper if non-human entities are given the rights and the respect that humans have reserved for themselves.

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