

## Voicing the Unvoiced: From Environmental Injustice to Activism in Mahasweta Devi's *Bitter Soil* and *Imaginary Maps*

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to explore and analyse the notion of environmental injustice in the short stories of Mahasweta Devi's *Bitter Soil* and *Imaginary Maps*. The Environmental Justice movement is considered to be a significant movement in the environmental history today. It has been compared to the civil rights movement and has garnered much support and encouragement from environmental experts, academicians and activists across the world. Environmental justice provides a platform for the marginalised and weaker sections of the society to raise awareness and protest about issues like environmental degradation and hazards that deteriorate their physical and mental health and well being.

Mahasweta Devi is a prolific writer of short stories and fiction dealing with the exploitation and marginalisation of Dalits and Adivasis in her works. She speaks vociferously about their life of struggle to earn a decent livelihood and also enable them to fight for their rights. She makes a strong attempt to voice the difficulties and arduous life of the unvoiced that is the tribal population inhabiting the regions of Bihar and West Bengal. Her purpose in writing short stories such as *Bitter Soil* and *Imaginary Maps* is to "expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies: . . . all of whom, as a combine force, are out for lower- caste blood".

KEYWORDS: environmental justice, activism, tribal literature, marginalised people, Mahasweta Devi.

### Introduction

The Environmental Justice movement is viewed as a significant movement in the history of environmental studies today. It is seen as a direct offshoot of the environmental movement wherein the main concern of environmental justice lies in people who have been deprived of the environmental privileges unlike the mainstream society. The Environmental Justice movement is said to have emerged in America post the conservative environmental preservation efforts of Pinchot, Muir and Roosevelt. It mainly dealt with the marginalised section of people namely the Afro-Americans living in deplorable conditions in America. The issue of environmental justice in the twentieth century has moved towards the inclusion of the inequalities faced by the poor nations as against the economic super power nations of the world. The industrial giants lead their oil extraction and mining deeper into the rainforests and mountains in Asia, Africa and South America endangering the indigenous life in these parts. As a result the agricultural and industrial hazards faced by the economically weaker nations visualize a near extinction of their tribes and species and are more vulnerable to the environment crises such as climate change, global warming and carbon emissions.

Activists working in the area of environmental injustices have witnessed and provide startling evidences of environmental hazards in their investigations such as community protest staged in Love Canal, Niagara Falls in 1978, against the chemical

dumping waste by Lois Gibbs and other women of the community. This protest was a result of the children falling prey to cancers, skin diseases at a young age and women with miscarriages and children born with birth defects. Similarly, in 1982, there were reports of arrests in the largely Afro- American community in North Carolina towards the disposal of PCB laden soil in the landfill. In the late twentieth century the Arctic was viewed as a nuclear and radioactive waste dump that caused many Eskimos afflicted of disease, nursing mothers found with toxins in their breast milk; contamination of fish and the eventual wipe out of the polar bear that sustains solely on fish. The level of dioxin found in the fatty tissues of marine animals too was alarming to give rise to reproductive ailments and cancer. In other parts of the world such as Brazil, local leaders and activists are fighting to save the last of the Amazon rainforests home to exotic species and human sustenance. In Nigeria, Ken Saro Wiva is waging a war against the Shell Corporation to allegedly misappropriating the Ogoni land for oil drilling; in India, the Union Carbide's emission of gases resulting in the deaths of many innocent lives in Bhopal popularly known as Bhopal Gas Tragedy are known to be classical examples of the environmental injustices in the world studied by environmental justice experts.

The environmental justice movement is viewed as a political response to the deteriorating conditions of everyday life in society and inequalities that boost economic growth at the cost of human lives. In Robert Bullard's view, environmental justice came into prominence in the 1990's with the terms like environmental racism and environmental equity discussing the environmental abuse faced by the minorities and the Afro- American neighbourhoods across America. Over a period of time, women, and people of colour and poor sections of the population were included in the agenda of environmental justice to realize that the issues faced by them were no different than faced by Afro Americans. Thus environmental justice movement cuts across boundaries of gender, society and geography in raising awareness about the disparity in living conditions faced by the marginalized sections.

This brings us to definition of the environmental justice as "the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment" (Adamson, Evans and Stein 4). The notion of environment and its varied interpretations have to be understood before the discussion of environmental justice.

Environment is generally defined as "being where we live, work, play, worship" (Adamson, Evans and Stein 4). This definition of environment is different from the meaning and scope of conservative environmentalism that focused only on the natural world consisting of the landscape, flora and fauna. According to Julie Sze, environmental justice challenges the definition of nature and environment by placing the human population at the foreground. If man has to reap benefits from a healthy environment, s/he has to work harmoniously towards the betterment of that environment that he inhabits with other non human species. At the same level, the ideology of environmental justice is more 'inclusive' than the traditional ecology groups as it fuses the social concerns like pollution with the conservative environmental issues like over population and scarcity of resources available to everyone. In a way environmental justice is supporting Barry Commoner's theory of environmentalism that "everything is connected to everything else".

Environmental justice experts and writers writing on environmental issues affecting the weaker sections of the population take into account tools such as statistics, demographic and geographical records of the land to quantify, measure pollution levels to raise awareness; initiate public advocacy and decision building measures at the local and global level. These studies act as background to literature

and literary analysis of texts dealing with environmental issues and justice in particular.

Deeohan Ferris and David Hahn - Baker elaborate on the principles of environmental justice that forms the cornerstone of the movement as “the principles of environmental justice movement include not only equal protection from environmental risks, or life and health issues, but also the right for people to live in communities that are environmentally safe, regardless of their race or income” (Ferris and Hahn- Baker 66). At the primary level, environmental justice activists are fighting for the equal distribution and allocation of the environmental benefits to all; each and every citizen of the world should be free from environmental risks; it also emphasizes that people who are unable to fight for their basic amenities are given a platform to voice their grievances; not to trade their health and communities to domineering and manipulative industrial organizations for capitalists gains. The main concern for the environmental justice groups is to demand a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment for all and also to gain political power to effectively protect their health and defend and manage their territories and resources of the communities marginalized by poverty, ethnicity and race.

The environmental justice activists have used various methods and demonstrations to oppose the injustices and fight for their rights such as civil disobedience against nuclear power, pollution and toxic waste; thousands of supporters have assembled at various dumping sites and demonstrated against the multinational companies for using the racial neighbourhood community to dump their hazardous wastes. The activists have tirelessly worked with grassroots leaders, academia and spokespersons from indigenous communities, writers of environment and literature and media to be successful in promoting environmental justice as a credible force to be reckoned with. In fact, the movement of environmental justice is consistently strengthened by the efforts of the grass root leaders and academia that have the potential to change and transform the way man looks at the world and the environment.

Shin Yasmashiro very proudly puts forward the success and achievements of this movement as “environmental justice has many significant achievements to its credit. For one thing, it has made the general public, policy makers, and companies aware of issues of fairness and equity with regard to environmental policy and the locating of environmentally hazardous facilities” (Yamashiro 42). The environmental justice movement has benefitted thousands of people by changing government policies towards environmental issues, redressal of race and class discrimination with dedication and sincerity in bringing a transformation in the discourse, theory and practice of environmentalism.

Fourth World Literature Environmental Justice , Activism and Mahashweta Devi

The startling evidences of Environmental Injustice mentioned above and the tradition of politically active creative literature , as embodied in the works of Ken Saro -Wiwa , African literature and other indigenous literatures is forwarded by Mahashweta Devi in India who traverses the world of fiction, history, journalism , socio-political activism with equal elan. Mahashweta travels to remote tribal regions of India ,gets an experiential understanding of the harsh living realities of the indigenous masses, forms and leads a number of grassroots organizations to fight against oppression/for justice in her works. Mahashweta Devi being a writer from the main stream society deliberately writes from the stance of the subaltern that is the

tribal population of India that has been neglected and harassed for many years by the government, bureaucracy and the feudal landlords.

The tribal population of India can be equated with the status of indigenous communities such as Native Americans, Aborigines of Australia and New Zealand. These marginalized and excluded communities of the world have been termed as “Fourth World Citizens” and the expression of literature is termed as “Fourth World Literature”. The term originated with a remark by Mbuto Milando, First Secretary of the Tanzanian High Commission who stated that “When native peoples come into their own, on the basis of their own cultures and traditions, that will be the Fourth World.” The term Fourth World is synonymous with stateless, poor and marginal nations and the Fourth World Literature often deals with themes of resistance, rebellion, opposition, assertion, challenge, sacrifice, suffering and displacement. The indigenous communities who have been deprived of their basic existence are being enabled to express their injustice and struggle through justified violence and activism by fourth world literature. Since Mahashweta Devi writes exclusively about the tribals and adivasis of India with respect to their struggles, exploitation by the upper caste communities followed by her unflinching efforts in enabling them to asserting their rights and self-identity, Mahashweta Devi is justified as the writer of the fourth world literature.

The location of Mahashweta’s short stories is Palamu, an inaccessible district, the poorest in the state of Bihar, perhaps the poorest district in India, where the bonded labour system survives. Mahashweta Devi brings to the stories in *Bitter Soil* and *Imaginary Maps* a bitter realisation about the fate of the tribal’s in the hands of the landlords and brutal exploitation of their life and dignity, “So the sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies: The feudal-minded landowner, his henchman, the so-called religious head of the administrative system, all of whom, as a combined force, are out for lower-caste blood” (ix).

Mahashweta’s *Bitter Soil* has a collection of four short stories namely *Little Ones*, *Seeds*, *The Witch* and *Salt*. In each of these stories, she combines the degradation of various tribal groups at the hands of the dominating community and shows injustice in different ways. Her purpose in writing the stories was not to please her readers but to shake them from their deep slumber about the inequalities affecting the unvoiced people and giving a voice to express themselves.

The first story *Little Ones* describes with a sarcasm about the tribe of Aagariya in the deepest tribal pockets of Lohri in Bihar. The story narrates incidents about the relief being stolen by little thieves in the guise of children. It is only after a bit of probing the relief officer realises the little thieves are in fact men and women who have stunted growth due to starvation. Their tribe has been wiped out due to exploitation of their natural resources for mining and industrial development. The harsh reality of seeing full grown men and women as stunted pygmy figures drives the relief officer absolutely insane and he is left weeping miserably in the end.

“Fear, terrible fear. Terrible, terrible fear. He feels a terrible fear. Why are they advancing in silence? Why don’t they speak? Their bodies are now clearly visible. What’s this? Why are they naked? Why is their hair so long? If they are young boys, adolescents, then why is their hair white? Why do the little girls, the little girls, have empty, sagging breasts? Why is he coming forward? The one with the grey hair? Don’t come near me- his terrified scream is silenced, what he gasps is- Don’t come closer!... (18).

The next story *Seeds* narrates a poignant incident in the life of Dulan Ganju who is exploited by the feudal landlord Lachman Singh. Dulan Ganju has been

gifted a piece of barren infertile land as an act of benevolence by Lachman Singh. He then receives a bag of seeds every year from the government welfare scheme. Dulan has no option of tilling the land as it is unproductive but to cook the seeds as an act of revenge. In a skirmish, Dulan's son Dhatura and seven other tribals get killed by Lachman Singh's henchman and the bodies are buried in Dulan's land. By the stroke of nature's bounty and the body's ashes communicating with earth, Dulan's land is nourished into ripe green fields and yields a rich harvest.

Salt is a story written to express the anguish over a commodity that is consumed by man irrespective of his / her status. When Gandhiji picked up salt at Dandi to abolish salt tax, little did he realize the ramifications of the Satyagraha. Mahashweta Devi incorporates activism in this story against injustice by depriving salt to the tribals of Jhujhar. She makes Purti Munda as the vociferous spokes person of activism. After being denied their share of salt, Purti munda locks horns with the forest Reserve and the elephants' salt lick much to the tribal elders ire. Purti becomes much successful with getting salt from the salt licks but dies in the end in an elephant encounter.

The first story of Devi's Imaginary Maps," The Hunt", set in the village of Kuruda which is known for its giant Sal trees, exhibits the ramifications of levelling the Sal forests and ensuing deletion of both resources and epistemologies embedded in these forests. The narrator explicates, "Once there were animals in the forests, life was wild, the hunt game had meaningless" (12). Together with tehsildar Singh, the city broker and exploiter of the tribal forest who represents the mainstream, the newly fledged post independence bourgeoisie landowner Banwari continues the process of deforestation, which goes in one breath with patriarchal oppression. Given the maltreatment of the indigenous women and their forests,"The Hunt" presents an alternative form of competent resistance of both women and the forest under the siege of feudal system initiated by the British and perpetrated by neo-liberal global capitalism. Mary's fight for liberty correlates with and invokes adivasis' struggle for justice. Mary's story functions as a framework of a larger history of her village, one in which colonialism is portrayed as metamorphic rape of both tribal people and their land.(182) (184)

Devi's second story, "Douloti, the Bountiful." negotiates ecological degradation vis-a-vis the literal erosion of the tribal woman's body after years of bonded prostitution and convulsion, emphasizing that tribal women bear the burdens of dispossession in our current world system. Thus the allegorization of 'maldevelopment' and imperialism as "rape" is made more explicit as a myriad images of bonded prostitution and slavery. Both tribal forests and women are tainted by rape perpetrated by the capitalist usurers so as to repay debts of men. Douloti the daughter of tribal bonded labourer, Douloti is subjected to multifarious physical and psychological abuses to repay the loan of her father. "When men fail to repay their debts, women pay them with their bodies "to quench the hunger of male flesh".(61) (!84) (186)

Devi's third story, "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha," concerns the experiments of Puran, a benevolent middle class journalist who is challenged to understand and represent indigenous tribes when he cannot quite comprehend their language or their ontologies and doctrines (192). The pterodactyl is prehistoric. Modern man, the journalist Puran does not know anything about it. There is no point of communication with the Pterodactyl. The pterodactyl cannot say what message it has brought. The journalist, the representative of the mainstream people, has no point of contact with the tribals. Their roads have run parallel. He does not know what the

tribal wants, what the tribal holds most dear to the heart. The tribals want to stay in a place which they know as their own. (xv ,xvi ) (Imaginary maps). On the one hand the tribal's rely on forest as their source of supplies and security and levy their toll upon it to satisfy vital needs ; the ruling class , on the other hand, denudes land to hoard wealth and power and capitalize on the sources of tribal's. Clara Nubile argues," Tribal people consider the land as an extension of the self and also as their motherland is very important for their burial cemetery, therefore the loss of land is undoubtedly the loss of self." (103) (Nubile)

### Conclusion

"The margins can speak and theorize. So, democracy is invented again not as a liberal theory of table manners or a socialist homogenizing but as emergency. It is an ethical term, a vision of repair that India desperately needs. An economics born of hospitality is challenging an economics created out of scarcity.

The tribal is saying that he is no longer an object of history, something disposable, a margin to be silenced. He is offering an understanding of what climate change, the carbon footprint means in terms of time and justice. Climate change cannot be set up as set of equations, one needs notions of connectivity of different order. It is a semiotics of the earth which reads cycles of rhythm and order in a different way. The tribes and the friends of the tribes are saying that sustainability and welfare are not homogenous policy voices. They are a collection of dialects, to be spoken of in a multitude of voices. Unless you can tell what the carbon footprint means in many anecdotes and in as many cosmologies, it will remain a lifeless idea."

Mahashweta Devi's *Bitter Soil* and *Imaginary Maps* enumerate how the tribal's have faced injustices and are still facing inequalities but have risen in strength and mobilisation due to efforts of some academicians and writers who wish to equip with them with resources, knowledge and access to activism. A day will come when they will hold their head high and march along with the mainstream society. Till then they enable us to think and ponder over serious questions such as Has empowerment really reached them at a grass root level ? Do their children have access to schools, education and healthcare? Do these tribal factions have access to clean air and water? Have they really been uplifted and if they have been why isn't their upliftment seen or heard by society? Do they have any power and role in decision making that involves their lives and livelihood?

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