

AN APPLICATION OF ECOCRITICISM TO THE STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S "SEED"

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Abstract

English literature has given impetus to the development of literature in native Indian language and creative and translational efforts in English. English has inspired innumerable writers over the last two centuries, ranging from Sri Aurobindo, Tagore and Vivekananda to Ramanujam, Rushdie, Vikram Seth and others. A recent social activist, Mahaswetha Devi with her hundred odd novels and innumerable articles and short stories is worthy of being added to the canon. Her fictional and non fictional writings give voice to the voiceless tribals in Bihar, West Bengal and other region of India. Her transmutation of authentic social data into creative material would guarantee her a place in the criteria of great literature. She identifies in the tribals many human and humane values which have gradually vanished among the Mainstream Indian population. Particularly, their close affinity to nature and their lack of will to fight for their own legitimate rights in spite of their capacity to hard work have appealed to the social sensibility of Mahasweta Devi and she uses her creative potential to promote social awareness about ecology and justice for the marginalized. The present paper analyses her 'Seed' as illustrative of her commitment to social justice and protection of environment.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Mahasweta Devi, Ganjus.

Environmental criticism, also known as ecocriticism and “green” criticism, is a rapidly emerging field of literary study that considers the relationship that human beings have to the environment. As Cheryll Glotfelty noted in the Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, “Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts” (viii). Environmental critics explore how nature and the natural world are imagined through literary texts. As with changing perceptions of gender, such literary representations are not only generated by particular cultures, they play a significant role in generating those cultures. Thus, if we wish to understand our contemporary attitude toward the environment, its literary history is an excellent place to start. While authors such as Thoreau and Wordsworth may first come to mind in this context, literary responses to environmental concerns are as old as the issues themselves. Deforestation, air pollution, endangered species, wetland loss, animal rights, and rampant consumerism have all been appearing as controversial issues in Western literature for hundreds and thousands of years.

Eco Criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.’ It was proposed by the pioneer or the father of this theory in the USA, Cheryll Glotfelty. The Eco-Critics put all the weight on the ‘nature’ and believe that nature exists as a force which affects our evolution directly as a society. They tend to bring out the part which nature plays – either in writings or in general purview. However, as it entered into the field of literary theory, a part bifurcated and established itself as solely devoted wing concerned with the (re)reading of literary texts and bringing out the role of nature, representation of nature and natural elements in the literature produced worldwide. It’s a fact that the major foci of green studies intellectuals are the regional literature of different places as we know it contains a lot of fusion of nature. Nevertheless, the well-known authors, poets, and literary figures always remain the central source which feeds the thoughts and findings of these studies. This paper substantiates the principles of Ecocriticism by applying in Mahasweta Devi’s short story ‘Seed’.

Mahasweta Devi was a Bengali fiction writer, a social activist, a crusader for the tribal communities, and a feminist. She was born in undivided India's Dhaka (now in Bangladesh) in 1926 into a family of writers. Her father, Manish Ghatak, was a 'litterateur' of the Kallol era, and her mother, Dharitri Devi, was a writer-cum-social activist. She was also a niece to renowned filmmaker Rittik Ghatak.

Before becoming a full-time writer, Mahasweta Devi worked as a journalist and an English professor. Her first book, *Jhansi Rani (The Queen of Jhansi)*, came in 1956 while she was still teaching at Kolkata's Bijoygarh College. In her 90-year-long life, Devi won the Sahitya Akademi award (1979), the Padma Shree (1986), the Jnanpith (1997), the Magsaysay award (1997) and the Deshikottam award in 1999. She has almost a 100 novels and over 20 collections of short stories to her name, primarily written in Bengali but often translated into other languages. Through her curt story-telling and fierce activism, Mahasweta Devi has left a mark behind.

The short story “Seed” is one of Mahasweta Devi’s most important works demonstrating the severe operation meted out to the tribal people. The story centers in Kuruda village where the land “is uneven, arid, sun-baked”. (Pg.22) Dulan Ganju, the protagonist of the story, is an old tribal man whose duty is to guard the barren field which is gifted to him by Lachman Singh, Rajput Mahajan.

Caught in the web of poverty, Dulan Ganju cannot imagine a place where the Ganjus have not been suppressed by the upper caste Malik Mahajans. He does not think of questioning why Lachman Singh gives a field of the barren field in a rare show of generosity.

Land or distribution of land is the root cause of increasing gap between the rich and the poor. Mahasweta Devi correctly documents it by saying “This gifting of land has many uses. Barren land can be got rid of. The recipients are bought over. One’s position with the sarkar becomes stronger. Above all ... there is the added satisfaction of knowing one is compassionate.” (Pg.27).

The powerful Lachman Singhis is too angry when Dulan Ganju didn’t want to take the gifted land. He said, “Typical of you low castes! Today I’m feeling generous, so I’m giving you this. Fool, do you think I’ll feel this way tomorrow?” (Pg.27)

Dulan Ganju is confused at the landowner’s magnanimity and feels that he will forget all about this land once his intoxication wears off. However, he soon finds out why the Malik had given him a field of infertile land. Lachman Singh uses this land to bury all the low caste people who dare to go against him in cold blood. The list of people he buried increases as Karan, Asrafi. Mohar, Bulaku, Mahuban and Paras.

The tyranny of Lachman Singh is revealed through the wordings of Dulan, “How easy! Two corpses on horseback! And those corpses must have been carried off arrogantly, from right under the Tamadih Dushad’s noses. Lachman knows there’s no need to hide them. Those who see won’t say anything. They have read the warning in Lachman’s sharp, silent gaze. He who opens his mouth will die. This has happened before. Will happen again. Once in a while, it is necessary to send the sky with the leaping flames and the screams of the dying, just to remind the harijans and untouchables that government laws, the appointment of officers and constitutional decrees are nothing.” (Pg.36-37)

Dulan has no choice but to obey and with each passing days as fears envelops him his behavior becomes different and strange. Even the police officials are with the Mahajan. Dulan feels guilty and his heart weighs heavy that he is fearful of his shadow. It is only when Dulan’s rebellious son, Dhatua is murdered by Malik’s henchmen that Dulan is finally able to oppose the powerful Lachman Singh.

So far Dulan cheats the Government and gets money, fertilizer, and seeds annually for the barren field or the uncultivated land. But to avenge Lachman Singh, Dulan decides to cultivate his land. In Dulan’s grief stricken mind the only way to avenge his son’s death is by sowing and reaping the paddy crops. It is as if he wishes to prove that the low caste blood and bones do not reap aloe and thorny bushes alone, they can also give life to paddy.

The paddy crop is significant as a meagre meal of rice is something which the Mundas, Oraons, and Ganjus can only dream of. It is evident from, “It took Dhatua’s mother just one meal of rice made from the seeds to realize that she had never eaten anything so sweet in her life.”(Pg.32)

Dulan’s attack on Lachman Singh is a poetic justice. Dulan says, “What was our agreement? That I shouldn’t farm. Why not? You will sow corpses, and I’ll guard them. Why? Otherwise, you will burn down the village, kill my family. Very good. But, Malik, seven boys-seven. Is it right for only wild, thorny underbrush to grace their graves? So, I sowed paddy, you see. Everyone says I’ve gone mad. I have, you Know. I won’t let you go today, Malik, I won’t let

you harvest your crop. Won't let you shoot, burn houses, kill people. You've harvested enough." (Pg. 55)

Dulan may have taken his revenge but his victory is not the victory of the Ganjus. Their fate would continue to be the same as the story hints at Lachman Singh's son taking over the reins and ruling over Kuruda Village just as his father had before him. As Dulan says, "There is a sense of relief after Lachman's death. Right now, no one wants to worry about the son taking on the father's role." (Pg.57)

This shows that the conflict and the struggle of the tribal people continue generation after generation. As Mahasweta Devi rightly points out, "these stories, written in the 1980's, are becoming hideous contemporary realities every day in India. Whatever is written in these stories is continuing unabated. So where is the time for sleep? The situation demands immediate response and action."(Pg.x)

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