

An Ecocritical Study of Mahasweta Devi's Short Story 'Little Ones' Translated by Ipsita Chanda

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is a term used to denote a critical approach in literature which was introduced in the later half of the twentieth century and relatively a budding theory in literature. It seeks to dismantle the anthropocentric worldview that humans are the most supreme entity or element in the whole universe as being superior to all other entities of nature including plants, animals, resources, etc. The present paper aims to analyse the story entitled 'Little Ones', written by Mahasweta Devi, from an ecocritical point of view. The story is a critique of the adversities undergone by the most immediate companion of nature, the Adivasis, on account of their defence of nature. It projects the dooming lives of the subaltern tribes inhabiting the Indian subcontinent whose rights have been overlooked by the government at the cost of its own interest. Their economic condition submerged into the predominant feudal system and their existence further worsened by environment-harming policies of the government, leave them with no means to escape.

Keywords: anthropocentric, worldview, ecocritical, subaltern, feudal.

INTRODUCTION:

The intimacy between man and nature can be traced back to the earliest evolutionary stage of humans dating back to approximately two million years. Every group of people with different ethnicity, culture, and conventions has their own way of associating themselves with nature. While humans in primitive times lived in perfect harmony with nature without overstressing on the environment, the so called children of human civilization such as industrialization and capitalization has led them to compromise their relationship with nature. Nature in a civilized world is not dumb but silenced by man as Christopher Mannes in his essay "Nature and Silence" writes:

Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative" [15].

Mahasweta Devi's stories seem to have a closer parallelism with the tragic tales of some gothic world while, ironically, they account the unacceptable reality of the subalterns – the underprivileged, the landless peasants, bonded labourer and miners in West Bengal and Orissa in post independent India. Mahasweta Devi's "Little Ones", with three other stories – "Seeds", "Witch" and "Salt", figures in *Bitter Soil* (1980s). The present paper is confined to 'Little Ones' as it substantiates the existence of a sinister environment, a 'wasteland', in

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Independent India. In the portrayal of such a 'wasteland' Mahasweta Devi accentuates the potentiality of nature. Nature in Mahasweta Devi's narrative is not a dormant entity created to supplement her plot. Nature for her extends beyond the setting of the story. It is active and alive as much as the characters in her story are. In this connection what Peter Barry writes in his *Beginning Theory* is worth quoting:

For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it. Nature then isn't reducible to a concept which we conceive as part of our cultural practice (as we might conceive a deity, for instance, and project it out onto the universe). [Barry: 243].

Focusing the narrative on a rebel against 'Bharat Sarkar' which happened years back, Mahasweta Devi dramatizes a bloody uprising initiated by the Agariyas of Kubha Village, Jharkhand. The Agariyas who originally mined iron and coal were reduced to one of the poorest tribal communities. The explanation they give to justify their fate is in connection with a disturbance caused by the Indian government to a sacred hillock. The Agariyas consider this hillock to be the abode of their three demons - 'Lohasur', 'Koilasur', and 'Aagaiyasur'. It is this event which has made the Agariyas believe that there is no escape from their poverty since the sanctity of the place has been destroyed. "They say they are impure. Lohasur, the patron demon of iron, no longer gives them iron, no longer gives them iron, nor does Koilasur, the demon of coal, allow them any coal. Aagaiyasur, the demon of fire, doesn't give them fire" [Bitter Soil 5, subsequently referred to as BS]. Despite claiming their deep religious adherence to the hillock, the government officials blast the Hillock. The Hillock symbolically represents nature in its most substantial disposition. It determines the fate of the Agariyas in Lohri. The dominance it occupies in the day-to-day

life of the Agariyas is boundless. To the Agariyas of Lohri, nature can undoubtedly represent fate itself. The severity of Lohri's condition cannot be comprehended by rational thinking. Like the people of Lohri, the BDO attaches the fate of Lohri to an unexplainable ominous force dominantly overpowering the place. He explains: "A terrible place. Who knows what there is in that soil! Nothing grows there ... Nothing grew not paddy, not jowar, not maroa, not bhutta. Strike the earth with a plough, and it's as if you hit iron beneath the surface. A cursed land. You can tell as soon as you set eyes on it." [Ibid:7] Mahasweta Devi comes close to Thomas Hardy in this regard whose "Determinism" is intricately interwoven with the worldview of Ecocriticism. Hardy's portrayal of fate is enforced through the machinery of nature. For instance, Edgou Heath in his novel, *The Return of the Native*, acts as a dominant force controlling the fate of its characters.

Mahasweta Devi wrote *Bitter Soil* during 1980's. The stories in the collection have Palamau, a district in Jharkhand, India, as its setting. Palamau covers an area of 5,044 sq.km and is prone to drought and famine as the region falls under rain shadow area. Under such circumstances, the Adivasis inhabiting in this area suffer from extreme poverty owing their debts to moneylenders and the feudal lords. They engage themselves in activities such as agriculture, forestry, livestock rearing, and mining in some places. However, being born as bonded labourers, they have no security regarding their economic condition. When any form of natural calamity occurs they undergo starvation and malnutrition, and ultimately succumb to death.

'Little ones' is a story of the Agariya tribes belonging to Kubha Village of Lohri, near Ranchi. The Agariyas are inhabiting in the Central and Northern states of India such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. Though not analogous, the Agariyas share a common mythical as well as historical identity as the

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iron melters. Sources from myths and ancient literature support the view that the Agariyas belong to the AsurClan and they believe themselves to be the descendants of the legendary king, AsurLogundih. Being a primitive tribe, the Agariyas identify natural entities and its phenomena to different gods and goddesses. Their religious life is a perfect blend of Paganism and Polytheism. Mahasweta Devi's narrative documents an irredeemable and irretrievable devastation of nature and the conflict is induced intensely between the nature worshipping Agariyas, the mouthpiece of the ailing nature, and the outer world.

In the exposition of the story, Devi gives a sinister description of Lohri. She presents Lohri as a "wasteland", deprived of life [Ibid:20]. The "wasteland" mentioned in the story may not be perceived as an allusion to T. S. Eliot's well-known poem *The Wasteland*, but the word certainly reminds the reader of the Eliotian setting in the particular poem – an impotent isolated dead world, a desert-like landscape that is dry and infertile, where life resists to exist. These two works undoubtedly have a close resemblance in the way they represent a sinister decaying world. To quote a few lines from Ipsita Chanda's translation:

The entire area is burnt-out desert. As if the earth here bears a fire unbearable heat in her womb. So the trees are stunted, the breast of the river a dried-out cremation ground, the villages dim behind a film of dust. The earth is a strange colour. [Ibid1]

In the story, Devi attributes a feminine identity to Lohri. She personifies the earth of Lohri as an ailing woman whose womb is not able to bear life. The analogy of the extreme environment to a 'heat-bearing womb' does not limit itself to physical metaphor. Lohri appears to have a wrathful temperament since her breast is not able to nurture her children. It is barren and has become a place useful only as a crematorium for her malnourished children. The author, thus, presents a very

tragic picture of a helpless mother with an infertile womb and a barren breast.

Mahasweta Devi's works are not a narrative which treads on the heels of stereotypically romanticised tales of the Adivasis. The setting is no lush green landscapes with enchanting flowers, brooks and trees amidst of which beautiful tribal girls, adorned with flower headgears, dance and sing along the tune of flute played by their male partners. Conversely, Lohri and its people do not incorporate such fantasy associated with any exotic tribal. The relief officer gets disturbed when he confronts Lohri. The bitter reality he experiences is divergent from the general notion held by the outer world. The landscape he sees seems a place where life is impossible. The people appear malnourished with extremely deteriorated health conditions.

The narrative evokes India's past to the modern reader. It documents the socio-historical and political scenario in post-independent India in the late 1970's. This is the most crucial period of the nation when the government enforce new laws to reform the pre-independence systems with the pledge to exterminate the hegemonic structures perpetuated by the feudal cast and class convention. However, this proclamation transpires to be absurd and duplicitous as the government become ignorant and insensitive when its economic interests demand destruction of the long preserved cultural and religious heritage of the underprivileged, especially the Adivasis who are deeply attached to nature. 'Little Ones' is an account of such ignorance on the part of government toward the religious and cultural sentiment of the Agariyas belonging to Kubha Village and the challenge posed to their very existence. The Agariyas, like any other tribal in the world, can be called animist who associate spiritual essence to non-human entities such as animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Nature is that intrinsic part of their lives which cannot be separated.

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Like the Greeks, the Agariyas of Kubha village consider natural objects to be sacred. Their identity is rooted in natural objects such as hills, mountains, forest, water bodies, etc., which are imbedded intricately in their folklore and myth. The Agariyas' attachment of sanctity and sacredness to natural objects and phenomena has close homogeneity to the Greeks. Their *Deota* such as Jwalamukhi, the son of King Logundih, can be compared to Hephaestus, the Greek God of volcanoes, blacksmiths, craftsmen, artisans, sculptors, metals and fire. Jwalamukhi is known as the "he of the flaming mouth" [Ibid:4] or in literal sense, volcano. It is because of Jwalamukhi's conflict with the Sun God that the Agariyas believe that they have been born poor. They say their "wealth earn from iron" [Ibid:5] have turned to ashes. The BDO who introduces the Agariyas to the relief officer belittles the strong belief merely as a "jungle tale" [Ibid:5], a barbaric conviction.

The central action in Mahasweta Devi's narrative is the haunting activities associated with the little pygmy ghosts. They symbolise the worst consequences of disruption in ecosystem. "Little ones" is the testament of the disintegration of the ecosystem. The story accounts the irreversible damage caused to the well-preserved relationship between man and nature. The degraded environment of Lohri and the malnourished, diseased, disfigured pygmy Agariyas are the victims of this damage. According to Mahasweta Devi, the image of the pygmies has its origin in the book *The Geography of Hunger* (1952) written by Josue de Castro, a Brazilian Ecologist. Devi, in the introduction to *Bitter Soil*, admits that she found a page torn from the book in 1997 which mentioned about pygmy horses from Shetland brought to America for sale as dwarf horses. However, these pygmy horses grew bigger within three generations when fed with nutritious fodders. Justifying her creation of the pygmy-sized Agariyas, she further alludes to a report by Emil Tordey regarding tiny pygmies found in equatorial Africa who became normal-sized humans when transferred to agriculturally rich areas.

The demolition of the sacred hillock and the subsequent disturbance in the coexistence between the Agariyas and their environment is the origin of the sequence of actions in the story. After the rebel, around one hundred and fifty Agariyas belonging to Kubha Village fled into the forest. Since then they have never been seen. The government set out for intensive search operation in the jungle but could not succeed in finding them. The village was burnt down to ashes by the police and as a punishment taxes were imposed to the other Agariyas. Kubha village is now dead. It has turned into an uninhabitable place. The BDO explains, "[T]he police burnt Kubha village to ashes, sprinkled salt on the earth where it had once stood, and left . . ." [Ibid:6].

Serpil Oppermann in her article, 'Ecocriticism: Natural World in the Literary Viewfinder', discusses the relationship between nature and man. She points out that, "A vision of nature as a self-articulating subject refutes nature/culture dualism inherent in our thinking towards a consciousness of humans valuing both nature and culture in diversity. However, the assumption that nature speaks for itself creates a discursive problem in literary texts, for it is again the human subject speaking *for* nature in a paradoxical attempt to overcome the human/nonhuman divide within the discourse itself." ['Ecocriticism: Natural World in the Literary Viewfinder'4]. Oppermann's proposition doubts the recognition of nature's 'voice' as its potential is articulated by man. However she emphasized the importance to study nature from a "non-dualistic perception" and "not as the other excluded from the realm of discourse" [Ibid:4]. Nature and the Adivasis appeared like complementary binaries with no hierarchy but without the presence of one, the other appears absurd with no meaning of its own. However, the boundary between nature and the Agariyas fades away at many points as the story intensifies. The fate of Lohri and that of the pygmy Agariyas cannot be treated in isolation. Starvation and adaptation to extreme environment have brought the pygmy Agariyas nearly to extinction. Like the

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infertile fallow land of Lohri, they have become impotent not being able to bear offspring. The old male pygmy in the story elaborates: “Just 14 of us left, now, the rest are dead. Our bodies have shriveled and shrunk from lack of food. The men can only piss, they can’t get up any more. Women can’t bear children” [BS20].

Violating nature’s sanctity in the name of development has far-reaching negative impact on the lives of the Adivasis. The ecological devastation in the story has such intensifying effect that the humble Agariyas of Kubha Village have turned into vicious and savage creatures. They have become extremely violent, haunting lives of people from the outside world. Through a story narrated to the relief officer the readers come to know that whoever comes close to the pygmies have become insane. A driver by the name Bahadur is one such example. And presumably the relief officer is not spared. Their attack on the officer is depicted in the most brutal and savage form. The pygmies appear hostile and unforgiving. “They cackle in ghoulish, vengeful glee. Then they circle him laughing. Their penises rub against him, reminders that they are men, adult, Indian males.” [Ibid:20]

The tragic incident is set in an ominous place which seems to materialize the temperament of the wrathful and vengeful pygmies: “In the wasteland burnt by Jwalamukhi’s battle with the sun, the terrible glee of a few adult children. The glee of revenge realized. The glee of hacking off the enemy’s head in revolt” [Ibid:20]. The scene is hideous and has a life-threatening impact on the psyche of the Relief Officer. He finds no way to escape then to become completely insane. To reproduce Chanda’s translation of the scene:

He [Relief Officer] can’t say a word. Standing under the moon, looking at them, hearing their laughter, feeling their penises on his skin, the undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear a heinous crime of civilization. He feels like a criminal condemned to death. [Ibid:21]

Like the other stories of Mahasweta Devi, this narrative seems to be more of an ethno-historical account authenticated with facts of socio-political structures shaped by the land system of the state. That land system supplemented the appetite of the privileged and ensured to grab hold of the equilibrium maintained by the Adivasis in compliance with their environment. The destitution of the Agariyas is sustained by a vicious cycle operated by the privileged and the ineffective government policies. Owning lands in arid region like Lohri is absurd. The infertile soil worsened by ecological disturbance resulting from government’s mining activities leaves Lohri with no scope for agricultural venture. The BDO in his conversation with the Relief Officer gives a vivid picture of the situation. He sarcastically remarks:

Lohri is a terrible place. Even if you give those damned people land, they sell it off to the mahajans. They stare at you wide-eyed and ask, Where’s the water? Where are the seeds? Plough? Bullocks? How can we farm? Even if you give them all this, they’ll still sell to the mahajan, saying, What were we to eat until the harvest? So we borrowed money. Now, we’ve sold the land to repay the debt. [Ibid:3]

Being an activist, Mahasweta Devi leaves no room of refinement, fabrication and contrivance in her presentation of the subject as her objective is to make the reader acquainted with the underrated plights of the subaltern. In the introduction she gives to the collection, Devi says, “I believe in documentation. After reading my work, the reader should be able to face the truth of facts, and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India” [Ibid:vii]. Mahasweta traces the plight of the tribals to the ineffective land reform system and the caste-class structure. She says, “For the last five decades, one India has remained basically feudal, while the other has remained a victim of class and caste oppression. ‘Land is not yours by right, land belongs to the privileged’” [Ibid:vii].

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Regardless of its violent nature, the rebel of the Agariyas of Kubha Village is no less than any major environmental movements which have happened in the country. It is comparable to the Bisnoi movement which started four-hundred years ago in Rajasthan resisting deforestation; the Chipko movement (1973) which started in Chamoli District of Uttaranchal, where protestors hugged trees risking their lives to save trees; or the Baliyapal movement (1986) which resisted against testing of missiles on the fertile agricultural land of Baliyal villagers in North Orissa. The violent nature of the Agariyas of Kubha Village is justified by Mahasweta Devi. It is for the protection of their own rights that they have stood up.

Conclusion:

The story of the Adivasis depicted in *Bitter Soil* is a representation of all the six million Adivasis living in the country. Mahasweta has asserted this in many occasions. The stories revolve around the region of Palamau, which Mahasweta Devi believes is “a mirror of India”. [Ibidvii] ‘Little Ones’ embodying Lohri and the pygmy Agariyas is the story of every Adivasi group battling for their rights in any corner of the country. The male pygmies are a miniature sample of “Indian male”. They are the products of “heinous crime of civilization” [Ibid:21]. The image of Indian male becoming savage pygmy is not a mere tormenting supposition but an instinctive apprehension of activist like Mahasweta Devi regarding the outcome of resistance against such exploitation. The exploitation of the Adivasis’ environment-leaving agricultural land fallow, excavating land for mining purposes, deforestation and depriving every right of the Adivasis (even the right to exist) is not a new story in independent India. The dichotomy

between the tribal world and the outer world cannot be brought to an end by any developmental policy but through a serious concern toward their environment which is not only their means of livelihood or existence but also their identity. The outside world needs to understand that the Adivasis’ myth and folklore identified with all natural entities is not a “jungle tale” but a strong conviction which cannot be challenged in any form.

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