

Beyond Binary Feminism: Intersections of Gender, Politics and Ecology in the Writings of Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract—This paper, titled “Beyond Binary Feminism: Intersections of Gender, Politics and Ecology” in the Writings of Mahasweta Devi,” investigates the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and ecofeminism, highlighting the interwoven structures of gender, caste, class, and state power. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality and Michel Foucault’s ideas of power and subjugated knowledge, the article analyzes how marginalized subjects are oppressed by multidimensional socio-political structures.

Furthermore, an ecofeminist reading of Devi’s writings demonstrates how her women characters are deeply interconnected with nature in a male-dominated society. Here, nature functions not only as a source of solace but also as a space of empowerment that enables resistance against social exploitation.

Index Terms—Intersectionality, Ecofeminism, State Power, Subjugated Knowledge, Women Characters, Nature.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahasweta Devi, one of the most influential writers in Indian Literature, holds a unique position in the discourse of gender, politics and sexuality. Her writings delve into the lived realities of marginalized communities such as tribal communities, Dalits, women and political rebels. The traditional reading of Mahasweta Devi's narratives categorized her as a feminist writer within binaries: man / woman, oppressor/oppressed, victim/resistor. But nowadays the approach beyond binary feminism has become necessary for the heterogeneity of voices and resistances in her works. It opens up space for critical rethinking of feminist discourse in South Asia in a broader way. This framework foregrounds fluid and intersectional identities in her characters who are not only oppressed by patriarchy but also victims at the

hands of State politics and violence. For example, Draupadi 's resistance is not a feminist act, but a political intervention. The intersectional (gender, politics, and sexuality) framework of reading explores in her narratives how body politics, desire and resistance are entangled with power structures including state surveillance, capitalist exploitation and social exclusion. As Foucault teaches - "where there is power there is resistance"¹. The more you suffered the greater knowledge you have. Foucault termed this as 'subjugated knowledge'².

Intersectionality serves several theoretical and political purposes. It destabilizes gender and race binaries in a complex theoretical manner. Because intersectionality is attuned to subjects who “exist...within the overlapping margins of race and gender discourse and the empty space between”. It is a tool particularly adopted at capturing and theorizing the simultaneous of race and gender and social process.³ The term ‘intersectionality’ is coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw who introduced the 'multidimensionality' of marginalized subjects' lived experience. 'Single axis framework' is rejected by it. In this way race and gender shape multiple dimensions of black women's experiences. The theoretical practices of intersectionality examine how categories of identity (e.g. sexuality, race, class, gender, age, ability etc.) and structures of inequality are mutually constituted and must continually be understood in relationship to one another.⁴

II. DISCUSSION

Women's identity in Mahasweta Devi's writings has multi-dimensional themes of oppression, resistance and survival. Her writings inspect intersection of gender, class, caste and politics highlighting the

complexity of women's lives in patriarchal and hierarchical society. The women characters of her works get voice and strength to resilient against the oppression.

The dramatization of 'Mother of 1084' represents the documentation of the Naxalite Movement in West Bengal. The text demonstrates woman's identity and the agency which are dependent on socio-economic and political circumstances. Sujata, Brati's mother exists as 'other' in the patriarchal household. Her emotions are overheard by her husband her child to maintain their social status.

Basically, the movement affects the lives of women across classes. Each mother shares the sorrows and griefs on the loss of her son but the social status or class position dedicates their vulnerability to the power of the state and social judgement.

Brati's involvement in the Naxalite Movement suggests an eco feminist link between social justice and environmental ethics. The movement arises on behalf of peasants, tribals, and the working class, who directly depend on land and ecology for their livelihood. Devi criticizes urban alienation, as metropolitan life is filled with ecological and emotional barrenness. She also suggests that ecological destruction and social oppression stem from the same hegemonic structures.

Though living in slum Somu's mother accepts the political realities, its aspects and her son Somu's involvement in the movement. In contrast, Sujata stays affirm and apolitical to maintain their class status. So, she tries to hide the involvement of Brati in Naxalite Movement. Towards the end of the novel, the intersecting forces influence Sujata to confront the hypocrisy faced in her life.

In Devi's 'Draupadi' from Breast Stories collection, Dopdi Majhen, a tribal woman and Naxalite activist whose body becomes the state of violence and triumphant defiance. Here intersectionality highlights the complexity of resistance strategies employed by multi-dimensional marginalized subjects. Mahasweta Devi's representation of Draupadi or Dopdi not just a result of suffering being a woman, but also the result of her tribal and marginalized status. She faces overlapping oppressions of gender, class and caste, which forms a unique marginalization. Devi portrays Dopdi as agent of resistance where her body is used as a site of defiance against the overlapping oppressions. Here female body transforms to a subject from object.

She says, "You can strip me, but how can clothe me again? Are you a man?"⁵

Nature is the only resource for the tribes, as they derive their livelihood from it. However, in the short story Draupadi, patriarchal commercial enterprises intervene in the ways of life of the tribal community. No virgin forests are left for them to settle anew. Here, ecofeminism draws a parallel between the degradation and exploitation of both women and nature. Moreover, for the revolutionaries, the forest also functions as a shelter, offering refuge in its darkness when they are attacked. Thus, both nature and woman are characterized by self-sufficiency and self-protectiveness, and their inherent resilience transforms into a formidable force when their autonomy is threatened.

'Breast Giver' tells a tragic story of a lower caste woman 'Jashoda' married to a Brahmin family. Jashoda is forced to support her family after her husband has become crippled. She takes up the job to suckle babies of elite Halder family by whom her husband got damage physically and became lame. Her body is exploited and treated as commodity. When her breast stops to produce milk and gets cancer, Halder family rejects her. A woman is a mother until her is of use. Her identity or existence comes at stake while her body stops to function. Basically, 'Breast Giver' narrates the themes of class exploitation and commodification of motherhood.

The novel 'Chotti Munda O Tar Teer' translated in English as 'Chotti Munda and his Arrow' by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak portrays the famous iconic tribal character Chotti Munda through whom indigenous consciousness is represented. The story explores the themes of marginalization and power politics imposed upon the Munda community. The whole narrative highlights how national projects, deforestation effect the life of tribal community as they are very close to nature which is the primary source of their livelihood. As a result, they become victims in the hands of money lenders and exploitative landlords. Deprived of their lands and their traditional occupation, they are compelled to be slave or labour. The story swiftly changes the lives of Munda tribes from a distinct ethnic group to major subaltern classes.

Women in this text are also portrayed as the resilient figures who actively participated in resistance. Besides women characters, Mahasweta Devi represents forest as a helpless woman who is exploited in the hands of

male dominated society. Forest stands for the earthly productiveness and fruitfulness. As Vandana Shiva says: "The ecological crisis is, at its root, the death of feminine principle, symbolically as well as in contexts such as rural India, not merely in form and symbolically but also in everyday process of survival and sustenance"⁶. This forest is connected with the struggles of woman, tribal and peasants victimized by male dominated society. The landowners never allow Mundas in acquisition of land. They want to utilize them as bonded labour. Chotti understands, "Be it barren, be in stony, a bit of land means trying one's drifting existence to an anchor"⁷. When Harbans and Tirathnath come to know about Chotti's land acquisition they become dissatisfied.

Mahasweta Devi's Rudali examines the journey of Sanichari from silence and oppressed figure to an empowered leader. This text exemplifies subaltern empowerment, collective resistance and solidarity in overcoming oppressions.

The relationship between Sanichari and Bakhni explores how women from backward communities can use solidarity to assert their agency. Both Sanichari and Bakhni challenge Brahmanical patriarchy that subjugates them. The upper caste landlords exploit Sanichari's grief for public display. Here, Sanichari is commodified as she is poor, female and socially powerless. That means she suffers from gendered labour, class exploitation and caste hierarchy. Thus, the profession of Rudali, the professional mourner exposes the hypocrisy of feudal upper caste society. Encounter with death of Sanichari's husband, son and relatives normalizes her grief and strips her to the 'luxury' of mourning. She converts her imposed sorrows into means of survival and limited resistance. Though the text Rudali does not explicitly represent an eco feminist approach, it symbolically foregrounds ecofeminism through women's bodies and their suffering alongside exploited land and natural resources. It is patriarchy and, simultaneously, the same upper-class landlords who exploit nature as well as labour, wealth, and women's grief. Sanichari and Bikhni transform mourning into a collective and organized practice that exposes feudal hypocrisy. Their assertion of agency challenges patriarchal norms that expect women to remain silent. Thus, ecofeminism emphasizes grassroots resistance rooted in lived experience. In Rudali, women and nature share suffering at the hands of a class-based

patriarchal society, suggesting possibilities of resistance through solidarity.

III. CONCLUSION

Mahasweta Devi portrays her characters not as victims but as agency that challenges dominant narratives of silence and passivity. Even the oppression in her narratives is not merely singular, it is multilayered as gender, caste and class shape lived realities. She highlights on social hierarchies and exposes how it operates simultaneously, intensifying suffering while rendering resistance invisible. At the same time, she urges her readers to recognize the interconnected structures of social injustice which perpetuate inequality.

IV. NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality volume I: An Introduction* (New York, 1978),95.
2. Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures", *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977*(Uk, 1980) 78-108
3. Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the margins: internationality, identity politics, and violence against women of color ', *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991)1241-1299.
4. Kimberle Crenshaw, ' Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of anti-discrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics, *University OfChicago Legal Forum* 1989, no.1 (1989) 139.
5. G Vaidyanathan, *Mahasweta Devi: Draupadi* (Agra: Lakshmi Narayan Agarwal,2014), 45.
6. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (Mumbai: Women Unlimited,2023), 42
7. Mahasweta Devi, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Calcutta: Seagull Books,2019)147.

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