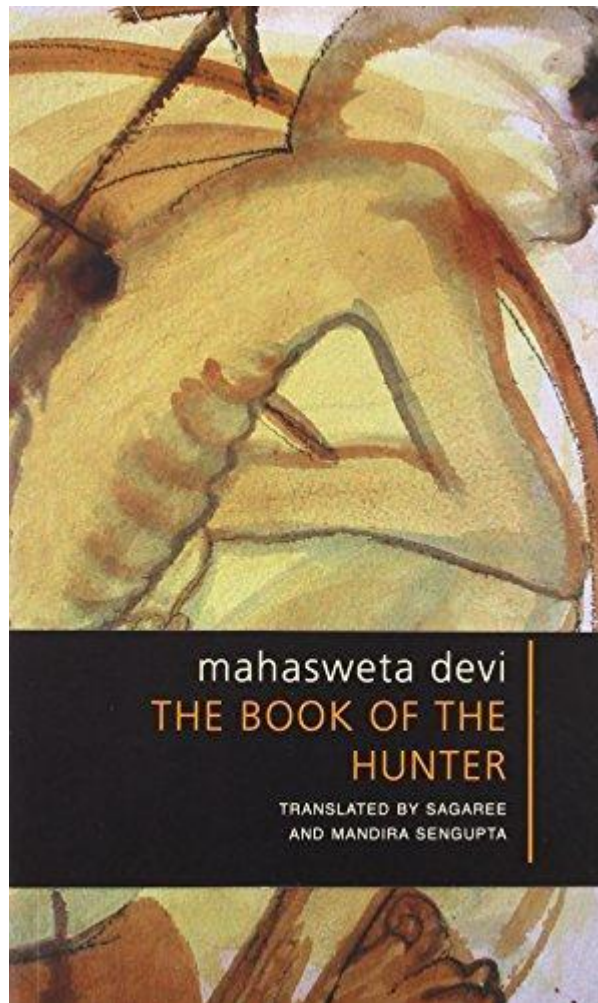

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Socio-cultural Identity of Shabars in the Novel *The Book of the Hunter*

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Abstract

Mahasweta Devi is a Bengali novelist, playwright, short-story writer, journalist and social-activist. Her works are filled with the lives of the downtrodden, the oppressed, the

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marginalized and the most neglected. She documents that the life of the tribal. With the pen in her hand becoming a sword, she wages a persistent battle to provide them justice. This research paper aims to study the life of Shabar tribes as depicted in her novel, *The Book of the Hunter* (2002). This research also tries to highlight the importance of preserving the forest, its resources and the culture of the tribal. This research presents how their culture is affected by the mainstream. It stresses the importance of preserving the oral traditions, folklore, myths of the tribals. It tries to change the negative attitude towards the subaltern and be ready for the revolt.

Socio-cultural Identity of Shabars in the novel *The Book of the Hunter*

Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter* was first published in Bengali as *Byadhkhandain* 1994. It was translated into English and was later published in 2002. It tells the story of Shabar tribes (also known as 'Sabar' or 'Saora') whose population is predominantly found in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. This novel is the one in which fact and fiction, legend and history, folklore, myth, oral history coalesce to create a remarkable dramatic whole. This research presents how Mahasweta Devi has tried to describe their socio-cultural Identity, the clash of cultures, the differences between the majority and the minority, the ignorance and lack of understanding of the mainstream in the issues concerning the subaltern 'Shabar' tribes.

Chapters of the Novel and Their Focus

The novel is divided into nine chapters of unequal size. An account of the domestic life of Mukundaram is given in the first chapter. Madhab Ojha, Mukunda's great grandfather, was brought by Birdigar Datta to Daminya to maintain the cycle of daily worship for the gods in the temple, in the Datta's family home and in the village as well. Mukundaram, a Brahmin by caste and the great grandson of Madhab Ojha has been living as a disciple of Gopinath Nandi, the Talukdar in Daminya. He was given land to cultivate along with cattle and other provisions and facilities. However, times changed and a new ruler of the land Mamud Sharif who was a tyrant came to power.

Mukunda

Mukunda begins to feel inconvenient and sensing the danger pays a visit to his uncle Ganesh who has deep knowledge about the affairs of the state and life. He counsels Mukunda to leave Daminya and go to Ararha. Mukunda feels very sad to leave his birth place, particularly where his dear mother Daibaki had planted several trees, cultivated him and had made him a scholar. Daibaki had passed away by then. Mukunda, with his wife Jagadishwari, his son Shibu and daughter Shiuli sets off to a new land. There was a huge jungle called Chandir Bon beyond the town of Ararha.

At the edge of this jungle, there lived a tribe of hunters or Akhetiyas belonging to the Shabar clan. However, Mukunda becomes inquisitive to know about the history of the tribals and meets Tejota, the mother of young Kalya Shabar. Tejota is prominently respected by the Shabars for she possesses great wisdom that has been passed on to her by her own father Danko Shabar who has retreated into the forest to safeguard a mythical and mysterious temple of Abhayachandi, the forest goddess.

Abhayachandi

Tejota narrates the story. She says that in the ancient times, Abhayachandi, the forest goddess gave ‘Abhaya’ (or) ‘reassurance’ to all the tribals that she will safeguard all of them including the trees and animals. There was a king of the town who wanted to construct a temple for Abhaya but he was unaware of how the idol should be. A young Brahmin promised him that he will get the image of Abhaya and went into the forest. He met the Shabar priest and lied to him that he has been disliked and hence needed shelter. He guiled Kapila, the priest’s daughter and entered into the forest. He stole the idol and ran away. Abhayachandi gets flared up and curses him that his family would perish and it really perished as it was said. The goddess also cursed the Shabars for foolishly trusting a Brahman and saying that they would be scattered in all directions and they should never touch the feet of a Brahman or befriend them thereafter.

Kalya Shabar

Kalya Shabar, the son of Tejota is married to his childhood playmate and the daughter of his mother’s friend Phuli. Their affection knows no bounds. Kalya, in particular is so possessive

about Phuli that he does not like her even to speak to Jagadishwari, Mukunda's wife for two reasons – one is that they are town-dwellers and their culture is different and the other is that she is a Brahmin and according to the legend, Abhayachandi, the forest goddess had cursed them for trusting a Brahmin. So, Kalya wants Phuli to abstain herself from interacting with them. He even mercilessly beats her at times. This rage of Kalya perturbs Tejota who wants to pass on her wisdom to him but is doubtful whether he is matured enough to carry it on. Tejota pleads her son to restrain himself,

Kalya! Kalya! Why won't you learn lessons from the forest even now? Do the tigers and deer thrash their females mercilessly like you do to yours? 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 banyan tree, but there is no needless killing, violence or destruction. Meanwhile, you beat Phuli, get angry whenever you see town folk-you burn like a hot fire! You have hopes of getting knowledge. I want to give it to you. I do, but now I am afraid and I have doubts. (100-101)

Kalya is so proud of his own tribal customs and heritage that he does not like his wife Phuli to be so subservient to go from house to house of the elites and sell. He feels it is below their decency and decorum. Phuli, in a conversation with her friend Sana says, "He dislikes my doing so and says, it's one thing for you to sell meat and skin in the market because that's what we tribals do. But I won't let you go selling door to door in town." (Devi, 86) This thought-process of preserving human dignity, individuality and reverence for the status of Shabartribals is reflected at another instance when Kalya tells his mother Tejota the reason why he doesn't like Phuli to be in proximity with Mukunda's wife or any other upper caste/class people, "They give her handouts, as if she were a beggar, Ma! Rice, coconuts, bananas and all kinds of other things! Nowadays Shabars do see other folks too. The time is gone when we were the only people! Their houses are nice, they talk well and have good hearts. Phuli sees how they are and judges me by their standards." (121)

This may appear to be as inferiority complex on the part of Kalya but at a deeper level, it is a lamentation and despair at the insecurity encroaching on the Shabar community. It is not just

the matter of accepting the basic needs, provisions and help of the elites. It is not just materialistic subservience but it is also emotional, social and cultural. In a way, it is eclipsing their identity. Kalya cannot digest the idea of comparison or relative merit with those of the elites. The Shabars have their own code of conduct, their own paradigms; their own values which they feel should not be put to test or made to come into clash with those of the elites.

voice of the Shabar community

Voice of the Shabar Community

The views of Kalya are actually the voice of the Shabar community. His words reflect the apprehension and the very many fears of the Shabars as they are under perpetual threat from the geographical, material, conceptual and cultural invasion of the mainstream/elites which may lead to the erosion of their own. The thoughts of Tejota justify this,

...the town and its people would spread out, and the dwellers at the edge would set their eyes on the other's houses, yards, ways of living and customs. The younger generation would be influenced. Sana's family had learned to save. This year their roof was not made of leaves, but of hay. It was quite an event to see Shabars suddenly smoothing mud over their house walls and painting pictures on them! Their ways were quite different from the other Shabars. Sana's husband did not thrash her, and Sana had oil in her hair and rice in store. There was no stopping the times from changing! A Shabar understood that the more others encroached, the more his existence would be threatened. (121-122)

Thus, in the world of Shabars, everything is similar to the nature that they see around them.

Animal World

The laws that govern the animal world, the forest and those laws explored by Abhayachandi are to be followed. Any attempt to go away from them is likely to doom them. The town-dwellers have a different idea about the Shabars. Kalar-ma, the house-maid of Mukunda makes an insight, "They're a wild race, and do they know anything? Never mind about them! Whatever comes out of the jungle, they'll eat it scalded or roasted. They won't work on any schedule, they won't farm, and they'll retort, why plough when there's a forest?" (76) However, it is also to be noted that the Shabars are not lazy and irresponsible. DankoShabar, the headman of the community before seeing that Kalya is married to Phuli says:

Kalya is my grandson, the eldest son of my only daughter. So now I'm going to make a rule that only five deer skins may be taken. And one or two wild boars – no one will ever give more than that. You've got a daughter's wedding and she's under Abhaya's protection-what's the point of inviting Ma's curse by killing too many deer, tigers or boars? (77-78)

Close Bond with Nature

In general, the tribals have always enjoyed a close bond with nature. The tribals share a deep intimacy with their forest habitats. Similarly, the Shabars also maintained a close affinity with forest. Their life is inseparable from the forest is a blessed one. They are guarded by their deity, Abhyachandi, who also provides to all their needs. The Shabars believe that their Goddess blesses them with fearlessness. Talking about the greatness of their deity, Kalya, the hunter tells the Brahmin, “And to everyone and everything! The Forest, the animals, the birds, and the Shabars – she gives them all courage and keeps them under her wing...” (44). Abhaya is their reference to the forest in which they live. They consider the forest itself to be their mother. The Shabars are devoted to the forest. They are fully aware of the fact that “A Shabar is where the jungle is”. (86)

Diverse Tribal Identity

In this novel, Mukunda's discussion with Kalya gives him the insights into their diverse tribal identity, and he learns their immense cultural heritage through their verbal experience of myth and legend pass on to him by Tejota. He personally observes the dreadful conditions and humiliation encountered by the Shabars with the dominant groups in the village society, and the tragic impact of the loss of their traditional forest lands and their cultural traditions.

Tragic End

In *The Book of the Hunter*, Kalya's emotional endeavor to recover his racial and cultural identity and pride through a re-enactment of the ancestral myth of the hunt ends in tragedy. As their old traditions and ways of life undergo the inevitable changes, they are forced to rewrite and re-enact their own traditions. Here, Mahasweta Devi explores the cultural values of the shabars and how they manage with the slow destruction of their way of life, as more and more forest land

gets cleared to make way for settlements. She uses the lives of two couples, the Brahman mukundaram and his wife, and the young Shabars, Phuli and Kalya, to capture the contrasting socio-cultural norms of the rural society of the time. Thus, Mahasweta Devi, through this novel wants to create awareness among the mainstream that their ambitiousness to encroach and influence the forests and influence the lives of the tribals. There has resulted in chaos and conflicts. She intends to say that the lives, beliefs and traditions of Shabars should be respected and it is as well the duty of the mainstream to protect the forests and way of life over there. It is not just physical but also spiritual.

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