

**Knowing the Unknown World of Tribes: A Critical Study of
Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter***

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the unknown world of tribes in the light of Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter*. Devi's extensive experiences of tribal life is discussed in a detailed way to tribal's aestheticism like - socio-political-economical system, the role of home in socialization of tribal, its role in tribal's courtship, selection of the life-partner, the role of local market, market as a centre of information, folklores, religious belief - animism and animatims, and festivals. Tribal's economy moves around their conventional agricultural method. It is primitive, self-sufficient, non-structural and unorganised. The non-tribal used their cultural and social inferences as a mechanism of economic and physical exploitation. Accordingly tribal's socio-culture system that helps to understand the beginning of human existence, reach at the edge of extinction.

Keywords: Tribes, Tribal Life, Self-Sufficient, Exploitation, Human Existence

Mahasweta Devi is the most influential author who has been writing, fighting and working for the marginalized relentlessly for the past sixty years. She is a unique blend of an activist and an author who has carried both responsibilities passionately all her life. Away from the limelight, she is working for the welfare of those whom the media and the government easily ignoring. Her writings are disheartening because it reflects the reader her or his own real face.

Devi is famous specifically for her writings connected to the research of rural tribal communities of West Bengal, dalits and women. In her laboured Bengali fiction, she often portrays the brutal subjugation of tribal people and untouchables by dominant autocratic upper-caste landlords, government officials and money-lenders. Referring to her source of inspiration, Devi states that she has always felt that the true history is made by ordinary people and she has consistently experienced its reappearance in different forms of folklore, myths, ballads, and fables carried on by ordinary people over generations.

Devi has an energetic and bold personality. There are six million Adivasis in India. She has done comprehensive research and field work in tribal regions of Bihar, Bengal, and Orissa and then shifted her field work into short-stories, novels and journalistic writings. Her activism and her writings have specific appeal to people, activists, intellectuals, and writers with commitment and sensitivity. Every-time she writes, the voice of the tribals and her voice become indivisible. One does not know whether a tribal of India is writing a huge novel or Devi is writing a novel or a short-story about the tribals.

Devi has adopted the case of these expelled tribes through her writing and social activism. She has devoted decades for working with these tribes as an author, journalist, and editor and all the roles played by her driven to the goal of making some grass-root changes in the woeful condition of these tribal people. She herself has found that in tribal people she acquired a boundless source of ingredients for her writing. Devi does not depict a fake and pleasant portrait of the tribals to charm her readers. She also speaks about the role of the Englishmen in alienating the small tribes. The Englishmen branded the small tribes as criminals. In the 1950s, Indian government denotified these tribes. Devi fights for these two denotified tribes of West Bengal - the Lodhas of Medinapur and the Sabars. She also established the group - Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG). The oppression, exploitation and deplorable poverty of tribal people make the theme of Devi's writings since we all know that regardless of the political hypes of the progress of all castes and creeds in free India, reality is quite different. There are several tribal groups who are thriving to survive because of this so-called modernization. For Devi, tribal people are like an unknown continent which is on the edge of extinction due to our ignorance. They are even unaware of Indian independence and slavery is against the law. Devi is a unique blend of writing and activism. Indeed, she always gives first place to her activism. She writes as well as fights for the rights of these tribes. She has even attempted to retropect the roles of the tribes in history. The pride and dignity of the tribal people have always been impaired. Thus, she takes up their cases to revive their past glory back to them.

Devi writes her novel *The Book of the Hunter* with the aim of re-discovering the tribal identity and lost glory of the Shabar tribe as she asserts in the preface of novel:

Such is my goal, but I don't know whether I will accomplish it. This is however a beginning. The encroachment of towns and non-advasis upon their territory, Advasis abandoning their lands and going away, the heartless destruction of forests, the search of the forest children for a forest home, and the profound ignorance of mainstream people about Adivasi society - these are all truths about our own time. (*The Book of the Hunter* viii)

Devi acknowledges her debt to Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakarbarti, a sixteenth century Bengali poet whose epic-poem *Abhaymangal* and particularly the "Byadhkhanda" portion of this book is the source of this novel. She surveys the cultural values of the Shabars by recording the oral histories connected to them. In the honour of Kabikankan Mukundaram, she states:

Mukundaram somewhat lightened the burden of mainstream society's sins by writing his Byadhkhanda. He was Aryavrat, the king of elephants, whereas I am a tiny ant who has undertaken this task with my meager means. Whether I have done the right thing or wrong is for Jaladhar and the other Shabars to say. (*The Book of the Hunter* ix)

The action of the novel is set in medieval Bengal and narrates the story of the great poet Mukundaram Chakraborty who was born in the clan of cultured and educated parents but is not set to writing since he is completely engaged in the household works with his mother. After the demise of his mother, he is pressured to leave his village Daminya and with his wife and children, makes his way across the forlorn landscapes to the land of Ararha. Even though the new rule and new soil prove to be very generous to him yet in the bottom of his heart, he wants to write something, a story that he is meant to narrate. In Ararha, he comes to know of the Shabar couple Phuli and Kalya who are full of passions but sometimes awful love for each other. He also gets the sources about the

Shabar traditions from Kalya's mother Tejota who worships Abhaychandi, the goddess of the forest who also becomes the muse of Mukundaram for his epic *Abhaymangal*. He urges Tejota:

'Ma! Abhaychandi'

'Some call her Abhaychandi and others call her a desolate forest. The forest itself is our mother, what d' you say?'

Tejota touched her folded palms to her forehead in reverence for the goddess! 'She gives us fruits ,flowers ,tubers, leaves, wood, honey, raisin, medicine, herbs, barks, leaves and roots, even animals to hunt. She gives us everything, keeps us alive- doesn't that make her our mother?' (62)

Even though Phuli and Kalya become the protagonists in "Byadhkhanda" of Mukundaram's epic-poem, the novel, *The Book of the Hunter*, reveals about the entire Shabar community and their inherent connection with the forest in which they live and die. It tells us of Kalketu who is the establisher of Shabar community, of the outlawed and mysterious abode of goddess Abhaya and the guidelines of hunting laid down by her. Even in the sixteenth century, women relished a high status in the Shabar community. When Kalya hits Phuli, his mother questions her: "What kind of Shabar woman are you, anyway? Why do you put up with it?' Tejota had grounds for saying that .in this kalilyuga, when the world was filled to the brim with human sin, the Shabars still abided by their ancient roles" (83).

The novel, *The Book of the Hunter*, also recounts the strange narrative of a Brahmin stealing the portrait of the Shabars' god and that is why Brahmins are undeserving of a Lodha's salutation. There are proofs backing the legitimacy of this story that even today a Shabars are privileged to perform the pooja at first at the Puri Jagannath temple. Indeed, the Shabars are rebellious of any infringement upon their lives. They have their own world in which they are fortunate to live. Mukundaram marvels while seeing Kalya and Phuli:

What do they eat? How do they look so healthy? What do they wear? How do they manage to walk off with their heads held high like royalty? People are so different in other communities. There is people selling liquor in the market, and there are prostitutes too. How does Shabar life remain so innocent? The women know no fear-how gaily she walked off with that snake! (103)

The Lodha Shabars blessed with a life of self-respect and dignity for quite a long-time until in 1871 Englishmen declared them as criminals for no reasons. The novel ultimately discusses about the intrusion of mainstream settlements in their sacred land, which destroys the serenity of nature. Tejota distressed about the entire situation pondering:

There was no stopping the times from changing. A Shabar understood that the more others encroached the more his existence would be threatened. Then, that was it. He'd pick up camp, sticks and all and calling 'Ma, Ma!' go off into the shelter of some virgin forest. (106)

Even in the sixteenth century, this intrusion is so serious that the Shabars have to leave their settlements and migrate from one place to another. Thus, *The Book of the Hunter* makes a strong plea to save nature.

The Book of the Hunter is also a powerful appeal to revive the lost glory for the Shabars since under the brand of criminals they are being suppressed for quite a long-time. The most painful example of this disgrace is of Chuni Kotal who is the first woman graduate of the Lodhas. After completing his Degree, she worked as superintendent of a women's hostel and even registered herself as a post-graduate student of anthropology at the Vidyasagar University in Manipur. People has brutally harassed and abused her because she is a Lodha Shabar a "crime prone tribe" according to the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act of India. The continuous harassment ended in her tragic death that united the expelled tribes. One more example of this injustice and discrimination is that of Budhan, a Shabar who is tortured and killed in the police custody for no crime. The tragic incident sparked Devi to found the De-notified and Notified Tribes Rights Action Group.

The novel raises the issue of that crisis which these tribal people are experiencing. They cannot adapt their cultural ethics and conventional ways of living due to the mainstream society's intrusion nor can they cope with modern ways of living since our society is not yet ready to accept them as equals. Devi speaks in an interview titled "The Author in Conversation" to Spivak about the tribals:

They are Indians who belong to the rest of India. Mainstream India had better recognized that. Pay them the honour that they deserve. Pay them the respect that they deserve. There are no dowry deaths among the tribals. And when they are called criminal tribes, I say there is crime all over the state of Bihar. All over India. All over the world. Do these tribes commit all these crimes? They are your easy victims, they are your prey, you hunt them. The system hunts them and uses them... (*Imaginary Maps X*)

With these kind descriptions, Devi attempts to establish the facts that the tribals must not be regarded as uncivilized creatures. On the contradiction, they are the ones who know the ecosystem system better than us. Our approach must be one of learning from them as; unlike so called civilised; they live a need-based and not a greed-based life. These people utilise nature's gifts with care and never disturb her treasures. Plants as well as animals are not exploited by them. They reciprocate their love and care for nature by what they borrow through replanting and allow the soil to renew itself by moving on. They are experienced bonesetters and have powerful herbal remedies for any ailments. There is equality between the genders to a great extent. Widows are encouraged to remarry and there is a balance in the male-female ratio. The tribals understand ecosystem such as the climate, the environment, plant and animal life around them. They are proficient in preserving the grain. They have a contraption method to assure that not a single grain is lost to the rodents. But government stores its grain in godowns and loses a large quantity to rats. The liquor they produce is the only wine made of flowers. Not only it is banned by the government but the process is regarded as illegal; there is myth that they get drunk. There are laws made in their favour but parallel laws curb their rights away.

Thus, the tribals have always proved themselves as skilled, honest, courageous, loyal, and devoted. Women enjoy immense respect in all tribal communities. Nature is respected as mother by all tribals. But in spite of having all these qualities, because of globalization and modernization they become the victims of exploitation and injustice. The mainstream society is doing a continuous, foxy and systematic assault on their social system, their culture, their tribal identity and existence. History must be re-written, admitting the debt of mainstream India to the struggles is not to be found only in written scripts but in their folktales, songs, dances, transmitted from one generation to another. So

much of it has perished with the people who have died with all this history carefully preserved in the very bottom of their hearts.

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