
Ethnographic Realism in Mahaswetha Devi's Imaginary Maps

Dr.M.Nivedita, Assistant Professor, Department of English, and Head, Department of Languages, University College of Science, Saifabad, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

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Abstract:

Mahaswetha Devi presents a vivid, truthful portrayal of tribal communities in India, capturing their struggles, culture, and resilience. Devi's narrative technique combines detailed ethnographic observations with a strong sense of social justice, exposing the exploitation and marginalization faced by these communities. Through her stories, she gives voice to the voiceless, blending fiction with anthropological accuracy to create a powerful critique of systemic oppression. Her approach not only raises awareness but also challenges readers to confront the harsh realities of Indigenous life and the broader socio-political landscape. This article provides a detailed analysis of Mahaswetha Devi's ethnographic reportage in her short narratives *The Hunt and Douloti the Bountiful* in the book *Imaginary Maps*. It demonstrates how women who are marginalized and demoralized manage to overcome the challenges posed by both the upper caste and patriarchal society. Suffering is an inherent and widespread aspect of the human condition, serving as a fundamental component of all phenomena. Pain can manifest as either physical or psychological and can be experienced at varying levels of severity, ranging from mild to unbearable.

Literature serves as a reflection of human existence, encompassing both the physical and psychological hardships experienced in life. When the characters experience minor sorrow, they feel unease and are unable to attain or realize their desires. These stories examine unsettling themes in modern Indian society by focusing on the characters and stories of indigenous tribes in India. Devi's stories depict the realities of Indigenous people and their way of life during the process of decolonization.

In *The Hunt*, Ms. Devi skillfully connects the plight of tribals in India to the suffering of marginalized communities worldwide through the powerful allegory of *Douloti the Bountiful* and the intricately crafted story of *Pterodactyl, Pirtha, and*

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Puran Sahay. This article aims to explore the process by which secondary genders achieve their independence, liberty, and rights in the face of subjugation by society.

Keywords: socio-cultural struggles, liberty and rights, societal aspects, subjugation, gender discrimination, etc.

Introduction:

The emergence and evolution of women's writing in nineteenth-century India can be attributed to socio-cultural struggles. The issue of women's emancipation is causing significant turmoil on a global and local scale. In India, the resurgence of women's rights is a result of the endeavors of reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891). They proclaimed women's moral superiority over men and referenced the Vedic era, also known as the Golden Age of Hinduism, when women were revered as possessors of shakti (energy/power) and worshipped as Durga (protector), Kali (destroyer), Laxmi (nourisher), and Saraswati (creator). During this period, women held a position of authority inside their families and were considered equal to their husbands. However, a subsequent transformation took place that led to the decline of women's status in all aspects of life. The portrayal of the difficulty faced by tribal women serves as a parallel to the social standing of women in India. The study is necessary because women are essential to humanity, making up nearly half of the global population. Their socio-economic lives have a significant impact on their future.

Throughout history, women, who are the foundation of society, have endured oppression, marginalization, and exploitation by men over an extended period. Mahasweta Devi explores the ingrained biases based on race, class, and gender and aims to foster a sense of equality among individuals to accomplish comprehensive development for tribal communities. As a subordinate social class, women challenge and dispel the romanticized ideas about femininity and assert their agency in shaping their future. Her works represent and express the tribal community, particularly the people living in the Palamau district of Bihar, whom she regards as a reflection of India.

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Throughout British Colonialism until the era of post-independence India, Mahaswetha Devi, a Bengali writer and social activist, has observed and experienced significant political transformations that have led to India's influential position in the international arena. Devi is a dedicated advocate for the social, economic, and political rights of India's tribal populations, particularly the 'Adivasis' or 'Scheduled Tribes.' Her unwavering support has inspired people of all ages. The term 'ethnography' originates from the Greek word 'ethnos,' which refers to a group of people or a nation, and the suffix '-graph,' which denotes the study of a certain topic.

Ethnographic studies concentrate on extensive cultural collectives of individuals who engage in ongoing interactions. Ethnography is a collection of qualitative techniques employed in the social sciences to study and analyze social processes and interactions through observation. The objective is to observe a situation without imposing any deductive structure or framework and to perceive everything as unfamiliar or distinct. Devi is recognized as a political anthropologist due to her astute anthropological observation skills. Her writing reflects an authentic portrayal of other cultures and societies, and she has a strong sense of social responsibility throughout her successful career.

Devi's work *Imaginary Maps* demonstrated how capitalist forces have infiltrated female reproductive spaces, transforming them into sexualized and commodified sites that exploit fluctuating ideological values. Devi identifies these gender transgressions in the rural regions where Adivasi women face everyday challenges in combating physical deprivation, hunger, and sexual harassment from men, both for themselves and their children. Within a corrupt social structure, the Adivasi population is considered a burden on the postcolonial economy, and the women in Devi's stories have borne the negative consequences of development propaganda. Hence, it is crucial to interpret women as territories that have been colonized to expose how patriarchal and capitalist systems at the local, regional, and national levels have deprived the Adivasis of their reproductive systems and means of making a living.

Imaginary Maps is a compilation of three narratives written by Mahasweta Devi in 1995. The stories included in this collection are titled *The Hunt*, *Douloti the Bountiful*, *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay*, and *Pirtha*. All three stories depict fictionalized

versions of circumstances that are highly realistic in the lives of Indigenous communities. The initial narrative, titled *The Hunt*, chronicles the encounters of the Oraon tribals, with a special focus on a tribal woman, and provides an insight into tribal existence during the post-independence era. This is a sociological depiction of the current changes in gender roles and relationships that Indigenous women are experiencing in their daily lives. This is a narrative that explores the courageous endeavor of an individual in their quest for self-discovery, self-preservation, and the defiance of women in a tribal forest territory.

Mary Oraon is of mixed heritage, being the offspring of a tribal mother and an Australian father. However, her mindset and principles are deeply rooted in tribal culture. Contrary to other Oraon girls, she possesses a fair complexion with a copper hue, a flat facial structure, a tall physique, and consistently adorns herself in a sari. She possesses a high level of physical attractiveness. Nevertheless, her gaze conveys a clear and powerful sense of rejection. She is well-regarded by the village community due to her exceptional talent and unwavering commitment to her principles. She believes that life should be more than mere existence, but rather a purposeful and meaningful experience. It is worth noting that both indigenous women and women in general possess an innate sense of self-respect and self-esteem.

The true lineage of Mary has caused her great pain, as her Australian father betrayed her mother. She longs to be fully integrated into her community despite their reluctance to accept her. Mary, in contrast to other tribal girls, possesses exceptional intelligence, an unwavering physical condition, and boundless vitality. These qualities lead her to decline marriage proposals from Oraon men, as she believes their way of life reflects desires and lack of discipline. She firmly states,

No, I refuse to live in a rudimentary dwelling, consume unappetizing food, witness the man's alcohol consumption, and lack basic hygiene products such as soap, oil, and clean clothes. I desire a life that is not of this nature (3).

The prevailing colonialist mentality of regarding native women as objects for sexual gratification remains dominant in this context. However, Mary's distinct personality serves as a means to ridicule the sexual advances made by the dominant mainstream forces represented by Tehsildar Singh. She employs the conventional indigenous legend of Janiparab as an emblematic representation of defiance.

Historically, hunting has predominantly been pursued by men and has symbolized a hierarchical dynamic between the prey, seen as a vulnerable item to be obtained, and the predator, who possesses superior mental, physical, and cultural abilities that enable them to exert dominance over others. Consequently, hunting has provided men with the opportunity to establish their male identity based on attributes such as physical strength, authority, and control.

In *The Hunt*, it is disclosed that the tribes partake in a ritualistic hunt during the Spring celebration, which is exclusively carried out by women this year. Men have been conducting the Hunt for twelve years. Next, it is the women's turn. It is Janiparab. Similar to men, women also engage in activities involving the use of a bow and arrow. They traverse through the trees and ascend the hill. They hunt and prey on hedgehogs, rabbits, and birds, capturing any they can find. Subsequently, they engage in a communal outdoor meal, consume alcoholic beverages, engage in vocal performances, and subsequently make their way back to their residences throughout the evening hours. They perform the same actions as men. Once every twelve years, The adoption of conventional male roles by female hunters illustrates that skills associated with hunting, such as wisdom, physical prowess, and understanding of prey, are not exclusive to masculinity; they may also be feminine attributes.

Mary exhibits gender transgression as she possesses the ability to assume masculine behavior and actively opposes exploitation. Here, the celebration of distinctions between men and women aims to highlight that attributes like aggressiveness, strength, passivity, frailty, courage, and bravery are not inherent limitations based on sex but rather acquired through socio-cultural influences. Mary's volatile demeanor and physiological distinctions become inconsequential as she confronts the power dynamics of a patriarchal culture. The tale represents a space that is undoubtedly subject to exploitation and oppression by society. However, it also possesses a powerful and subversive force that can completely disrupt the established order.

The novel is a compelling endeavor to examine the subordinate status of women in society by reversing the conventional victim role to seek retribution for injustice and oppression. Women are often perceived primarily as physical beings

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rather than individuals with autonomous thoughts and emotions. Tehsildar Singh, who visits Mary's village to purchase logging rights, is strongly attracted to her attractiveness. He constantly pursues her with unwavering determination. She is resolute in her efforts to prevent him and does not surrender, responding firmly,

You resemble a primate. Individuals such as yourself, who dress in fitted trousers and wear sunglasses, may frequently be found on the streets of Tohri. In their presence, I brandish this sharp-edged weapon known as a machete. Inquire if you harbor doubt in my statement" (9).

He is additionally enraged by the idea that a common girl can refuse him for an insignificant Muslim male. Mary invites him to a hidden location in the forest during the annual Spring festival, Janiparab, or the festival of justice. This action prevents Tehsildar Singh from pursuing him during the day of the Great Hunt. Symbolically, she is the individual who slays the largest predator in the jungle and performs the blood ceremony.

During the women's gathering, Mary consumed the largest quantity of wine, enthusiastically sang and danced, and thoroughly enjoyed eating the meat and rice. Initially, everyone ridiculed her for her failure to achieve a successful kill. Then Budhni inquired to see how she was consuming her food as if she had achieved the greatest triumph (16).

Mary establishes herself as a formidable advocate for marginalized individuals based on their gender by asserting her authority and taking a prominent position. Devi's intention in this story is to challenge societal standards and break free from the limitations imposed by patriarchy. She does this by defying expectations and asserting her sexuality rather than accepting the role of a passive victim.

Mahaswetha Devi's novella *Douloti the Bountiful* depicts the story of a girl who is born into an Adivasi community and is sold by her parents for a sum of 300 rupees. As a result, she is forced into a life of prostitution. The tragic narrative reaches its climax with the demise of Douloti at the age of 27, afflicted with infection and venereal disease. In this somber conclusion, the narrative achieves the status of a symbolic representation of the nation, which profoundly challenges the notion of

national unity. Douloti, an Adivasi slave who was subjected to extreme exploitation, passed away on the night of August 15, which is India's Independence Day. If the time aspect of Douloti's death already indicates the disruption of a national educational system that seeks to promote unity through secular ceremonies, then this disruptive action is also manifested spatially: The lifeless body of the indigenous woman is discovered scattered throughout the map of India, which decorates the festival grounds in preparation for the ceremonial act of raising the flag.

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labor spread-eagled, kamiyawhore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on August 15, Douloti left no room in India for people like Mohan [the village teacher] to plant the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India (Devi, 94).

Due to the principle that two objects cannot exist in the same location simultaneously, the boundaries of the nation only allow for one of two possibilities: either the Adivasi body or the Indian flag. Amidst this competitive situation, Douloti's body has unexpectedly positioned itself in a location that is not traditionally assigned to it. It has taken over the space that, as per the dominant power structure, is reserved for the nation as a whole:

The deceased tribal body can be readily and likely will be removed to make space for the standard of independence, unification, and modernity. Nevertheless, this action of planting and raising the flag will henceforth be recognized as a forceful colonization: As long as the tribal body exists, there will be no space for the flag. To establish the Indian map as a nation, the tribal body must be eliminated so that India can be established, following the ancient traditions of conquest, as an unoccupied territory. The sudden appearance of Douloti's impoverished tribal body challenges the belief that the territory was empty and could be easily controlled by the State without any conflict. It also challenges the notion that the country was inhabited by a single, uniform national population.

Mahasweta Devi asserts that in contemporary times, the lives of bullocks are

still regarded as more valuable than the lives of lower-caste bonded laborers. The narrative of Douloti encompasses various layers of oppression and marginalization, including caste, class, and gender, which intertwine and intersect. Douloti is compelled by her father to engage in prostitution as a means of repaying his debt to the higher social class master. As Mahasweta Devi remarks, this is not a novel occurrence.

Despite the legal abolition of bonded slavery in 1975, it has been succeeded by a more dehumanizing kind of exploitation. The peasants have no other option. Although they may have acquired land ownership with the dissolution of the bonded labor system, the land they obtained is essentially infertile and unsuitable for cultivation. Due to the lack of access to drinking water and irrigation, as well as the absence of other employment options provided by the government, individuals are left with little option but to resort to becoming self-employed. Even in the present day, slavery continues to be practiced by influential individuals and groups in various locations, albeit under other labels. This represents the current state of the social system. Douloti discusses the multiple inconsistencies that exist inside India. Born at midnight, she belongs to the first generation of individuals in newly independent India, filled with expectations for a fresh life and new dreams. However, it appears that there has been no discernible change among the tribals and Scheduled Castes. The perpetuation of the system of oppression persists, with the victims remaining unchanged while only the ruling class has undergone alteration.

Throughout her life, Douloti has endured physical harm as a result of continuous exploitation by those in positions of authority. When her body is positioned on the Indian map, it signifies that the entire system has become tainted. This tragedy highlights the government's inability to regulate the social system and raises numerous problems regarding her body. Undoubtedly, Douloti's tortured body serves as undeniable evidence that the process of decolonization has actively participated in the collective acts of patriarchal violation of the environment and gender-based violence against numerous individual women in India.

Devi's stories are characterized by their iconoclastic nature. She adeptly employs myths and harnesses their power to advance the interests of the tribe. Similarly, the choice of the term "Pterodactyl" in her story has strong implications

and is of great significance. The pterodactyl, an extinct creature, is revived and reintroduced to highlight the archaic tribal lifestyle.

Devi effectively illustrates the dangers of modernism and its effects on the uncomplicated lifestyles of the impoverished Adivasis by employing the story of the pterodactyl. The evident outcomes are discord and estrangement. In this narrative, Mahasweta Devi articulates her profound apprehension for the indigenous communities residing in the mountains of Madhya Pradesh, who are facing a progressive obliteration from the global landscape. To provide a comprehensive perspective, she intricately weaves a multifaceted narrative that portrays characters from many backgrounds in a deliberate sequence.

Puran Sahay, an extremist journalist, hails from the Palamau district. Contemplating the challenges faced by indigenous communities in India. The writer has invented him as a voice to raise our awareness about the tribal state of the area. Harisharan, the Block Development Officer, invites his close buddy to Pirtha. He asks Puran to compose a report on the drought and famine to inform the authorities about the severe situation in Pirtha. The narrative of discovering the truth commences at this moment, with the reader encountering several allusions to a vanished creature right from the first. The survey map of Pirtha bears a resemblance to an extinct creature from the ancient supercontinent of Gondwanaland. Puran is oblivious to the presence of the extinct pterodactyl's shadow that is ominously hanging above Pirtha, but he is cognizant of the artwork created by Bikhia, who is Shankar's nephew. Puran provides insight into the tribals' suffering and the exploitation they endure at the hands of the mainstream, revealing their hardships and the injustices inflicted against them. Pirtha is an Indigenous territory with a distinct and singular historical background. Due to their previous terrible encounters with individuals from outside their community, the tribal people are deeply concerned and disturbed by the presence of Puran. The expansion of woods and construction of roads has led to the convenient entry of bourgeois individuals and other profiteers onto tribal territory. The cave paintings discovered in Pirtha vividly depict the destruction of their territory. The authors investigate the impact of external forces on the erosion of their cultural heritage. Devi's portrayal of the figure Puran effectively brings the subaltern into existence through the act of writing. Puran's account of the tribal world sheds light on the plight of the tribals as the marginalized group who are subjected to domination,

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captivity, neglect, exploitation, and enslavement by the dominant society.

Conclusion:

The Hunt emphasizes the need to engage in violent resistance rather than passively submitting. It is a strong condemnation of a society that employs tradition, religion, and even physical aggression to oppress women. Mary challenges biological and socio-cultural constraints regarding polarised gender identities. Mahasweta rejects both the encoded sentimentality and the distinct environment of Douloti after her narrative. The act of negation, which involves both eliminating and retaining nostalgia and displacement, initiates a process of transformation. This process is carried out through a lyrical celebration of the nostalgic impact. At night, Douloti struggles with a fractured body that has been subjected to severe mistreatment. In "Pterodactyl," Devi also emphasizes the sanctity of tribal culture. Puran's account of the tribal world sheds light on the plight of the tribals as the marginalized group who are subjected to domination, captivity, neglect, exploitation, and enslavement by the dominant society. Because of their connection to the natural world, they are often perceived as "wild," "savage," and "uneducated."

Mahasweta Devi's objective is highly evident. Her objective is to enhance the state of the indigenous community without compromising their cultural integrity. Due to the modern world's lack of comprehension regarding the importance of tribal culture, Devi used the image of the pterodactyl in a manner that suggests an impending catastrophe. This serves as a warning to the outside world that the tribal culture is at risk of being eradicated from history, much like the extinct pterodactyl.

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