

Nurturing Sylvan Children in Mahasweta Devi's *The Book Of The Hunter*

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“The inherent weakness of the environment movement in India is that it swings between extremes of elitism and populism” (Vijayaraghavan 2)

According to Vijayaraghavan, elitists are those academicians, writers and “seminar – crawlers” who contribute enough and more towards the literature of the subject. Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil are elitists whose contributions in categorizing the issues based on perspectives and in shaping public policies respectively are deemed to be “mostly verbiage” by Vijayaraghavan. Unlike them people at the helm of populism like Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sunderlal Bahuguna and Medha Patkar have through their active participation lent their hands in safeguarding Mother Earth. And to this list of leading figures of populism, can be added the name of Mahasweta Devi.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the prominent Indian personalities, a momentous writer and an unswerving activist. Honours in the form of Sahitya Academi Award in 1979, Jnanpith Award in 1996 and many others have come her way in recognition of her literary achievements. Besides these in 1986 she was conferred Padmashree for her tireless battles fought for the Adivasis. “Mahasweta Devi devotes herself to the upliftment of the *Adivasis*, the original inhabitants of India and the most neglected, not only by giving them a voice in literature, but also in practical schemes for their survival” (Dutta 3). Mahasweta Devi's voice is originally heard in Bangla Literature. Thereafter, it echoes in English Literature with the aid of competent translators like Gayatri Spivak, Samik Bandopadhyay, Maitreya Ghatak, Ipshita Chand, Paramita Banerjee, Sagaree Sengupta, Surmista Dutta and others. The wide array of translators tells of her awesome role in fighting for and upholding the cause of Adivasis and their environment.

Her literary career began with the publication of a biography, *Jhansi Rani* in 1956. Following which in 1957 she published a novel titled *Nati* (A Dancer). Since then her pen has never ceased voicing the voice of the oppressed and downtrodden. Her novel *Hazar Chaurasir Maa* (The Mother of 1084) showcases the agony and tragedy of the Naxalite movement. Apart from this her concern for the tribals is evinced in her umpteen trips to varied tribal villages and the enormous research work done on them. Most of her short stories and novels revolve around the tribal life. “Mahasweta's first novel on tribals, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, articulates the tribal tale, placing it, within the wider canvas of India's colonial as well as postcolonial history” (Yamuna 103).

Like her first novel on the tribals, her latest novel *The Book of The hunter*, first published in Bengali as *Byadkhand* in 1994 and translated into English by Mandira and Sagaree sengupta is also equally gripping with its intermingling tresses. The novel is an effective conglomeration of fact, fiction, folklore and history. The novel traces the roots of the Lodha Shabars, recognizes them as a community that is closely bonded with nature and documents their sufferings. In 1871, during the colonial rule the Lodhas were branded as criminals, a stigma that is still attached to them especially to those in Medinipur. However, efforts are being taken in forming the image of the Lodha tribe and in restoring their self-respect. In the preface to the novel, Mahasweta Devi declares,

In this novel, I undertook for the first time to seek out the tribal identity of the Shabars. Whatever I have written about *byadh* (hunter) are Shabar life, every detail will certainly be corroborated by the Shabars themselves- the day they are no longer driven from place to place, cruelly oppressed, and insulted....

Such is my goal, but I do not 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 advasi society-these are all truths about our own time (viii).

The objective of this paper is to identify the Shabars delineated in the novel, to understand the pristine environment in which they live, and to underscore the challenges combated and the strategies adopted by the Shabars in sustaining their environment in Mahasweta Devi's novel, *The Book of the Hunter*.

The Book of the Hunter is a novel that discusses the hunter – gatherer Shabars and their customs and traditions that are interwoven with the forest in which they fearlessly roam and depend on for its natural resources. Mahasweta Devi traces their history to the sixteenth century Bengal that forms the setting of the novel. She expresses her indebtedness to Mukundaram for his inspiring epic, *Abhayamangal*, specifically the section of the epic *Byadkhanda* (*The Book of the Hunter*) where he focuses on the tribals and their deities. It is this section of the book on the lives of the hunter tribes that has inspired Mahasweta Devi to write about the plight of the present day tribals. The novel begins with an introduction of Mukundaram Chakrabarti a Brahmin, a farmer and a poet who compelled by circumstances leaves behind his land of origin Daminya to the land of Ararha yearning for a better life. In the new land after securing status, riches and peace an inner voice that is closer to his mother's instigates him to give vent to his creativity. But, for quite some time he is indecisive about the story that he has to narrate. Very soon Mukundaram gets inspired by Abhayachandi the goddess of the Shabars, the tribals who live in the forest closer to Ararha. Abhayachandi turns out to be the muse of his epic *Abhayamangal*.

Mahasweta Devi spins her narrative around the actual creation of his epic: how the poet comes to a new place, and gets to know the Shabars through their close interaction with his wife and other

members of his community, with whom they trade medicines and other forest produce. He learns of their myths relating to their origin and their occupation as hunters.... She creates her tale using Mukundaram's epic, her own first – hand association with the Shabar community and the writings of the Shabars themselves in the contemporary times (Nair 117).

The Shabar origin myth is narrated to the Brahmin Mukundaram by the Shabar Community head, Tejota, who possesses the secret knowledge of the tribe that has been passed on to her by her father, Danko Shabir. From the narration of the myth the readers come to know about the past of Shabars, how their goddesses had blessed them with seven pots of everlasting riches and made them the rulers. But the gullible children of Nature are cheated by the so called civilised people and as a result are forced to live in poverty until a Shabar succeeds in killing a golden monitor lizard and after which their lost glory could be restored. The novel is all about the fictionalized account of how Kalya and Phuli, the young tribal couple named so after their illustrious ancestors happily live in the lap of the forest as long as they are unaffected by civilization. In the novel Mahasweta Devi juxtaposes the Brahmin life that stands for civilization/urbanisation with that of the life of the tribals, a life lead in close proximity with nature.

In reality the Sabars are one of the most primitive tribes who are located in the districts of Sainghbhum, Ranchi and Hazaribagh. Presently they are on the verge of extinction. In the novel Mahasweta Devi, talks of them as people who live beyond the town of Ararha at the edge of a jungle called Chandir Bon. She underlines that they are not too particular about money nor do they have enough with them. In fact, they never realized that they were poor. They were content and happy with whatever they received from Mother Nature. The Shabar men roam "...around, bamboo staff, axe or spear in hand, killing birds and animals for a living – ..." (101), while the women go to market to

'... sell meat, feathers, skins, wood, honey, incense, fruits, *kul*, roots and bark. They buy nothing except for rice, cloth, salt, pepper and oil. They're always happy. They have so many festivals and holidays – both men and women dance and play on little drums. They mind their own businesses and are perfectly content. The men and women both toil hard. To this day, Phuli's mother and aunts can chop wood with ease and skin deer too. They have a fine life.' (49)

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 Kinship with forest, their environment. Their life in the bosom of the forest is a blessed one. They are forever well guarded by their deity, Abhyachandi, who also caters 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 inseparable from the forest. They are fully aware of the fact that "A Shabar is where the jungle is"(86).

Their propinquity with nature is so deep that they know in and out of Mother Earth. In the novel, Tejota, the old tribal woman's knowledge about her environment is quite astonishing. The

wisdom that Mukundaram, the Brahmin has gained from various books, scholars and experience is too little before Tejota's wisdom. Tejota, Kalya's mother has been bestowed with the wisdom by her father Danko Shabar who knew everything about nature. As Kalya's father, Megha went against the hunting laws of the community by killing a doe, he was not eligible to gain the knowledge and so Danko passed it on to Tejota who in turn would hand it over to her son Kalya if he proves befitting to receive it. Like her father Tejota also knows everything about the forest in which they live.

'... There's nothing that old woman doesn't know. The time the king's elephant went mad, she took one look and said, 'This is not a job for you.' Kalya and his gang captured the elephant's net. A nail from the gate of the elephant – shed had got stuck in the sole of its foot. Tejota pulled it out and put medicine bark on it ... she's really a wise old woman!' (46)

The Shabars have a great respect for her. She is in the knowhow of their history, of the myths related to their origin, of their goddess, Abhayachandi, about their community laws, of the different seasons and what is best for each of the plants, shrubs and trees that engulf them. She is fully aware of the medicinal herbs that grow in the forest and their natural cure. “... She can point out medicine herbs to the king's doctor...” (47).

Despite being kind to the king, the Shabars do not treat the king of Ararha as their king and so do not go to him for justice. But, the Shabars fight for the king of Ararha when there is an enemy attack nor do they never work in the army for pay. In general they do not recognize kings anywhere. They also do not have a high regard for a Brahman because they believe that the trust that they placed on the Brahmin made them lose their glory. These Shabars have rules of their own. They never go against it. Punishments are inflicted on all those who violate the community laws. When Megha knowingly or unknowingly kills a pregnant deer, there is no forgiveness for him. “A meeting had been called, a trial held. Megha had lost his right to become chief through his offence. Danko had said to him you live in Abhaya's jungle, and she is the creator, nurturer and protector of all living beings on land and water. To disobey her law is the greatest of sins!” (84) For ages they have been worshipping goddess Abhayachandi whom they revered for all that she is. The Shabars have great regard for women. Shabar men never received dowry to marry a woman. Instead, they paid streedhan in the form of deer, elephant hides, tiger skins, tiger claws, elephant tusks and others so that the bride's father can sell it in the market and buy all that is needed for a community feast. Above all it is to be noted that women are honoured and are considered to be significant members of their tribe as is Tejota. Women are allowed to remarry on the death of their husband or on their desertion.

The tribal men solely rely on hunting, on what their Mother Earth provides. They are satisfied with “ ‘... 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’ ” (65). But, hunting is not as easy as it appears to be. There are laws even for hunting. Danko cautions Kalya and reminds him of their hunting law when they go out to hunt the huge old tusker. Even Kalya goes against the hunting laws and so is killed by the elephant. The customs, traditions and the community codes of these Shabars make them superior to the civilized people and their practices.

Their intimacy with nature is enviable but it is pathetic to observe that they too confront too many challenges to sustain their environment. In the novel *Mahasweta Devi*, throws light on various challenges and their impact on the tribals, the children of nature. Of them the first is the depletion of natural resources. The Shabars' hunting expedition is need – based contrary to the want – driven hunt of the civilized. In the novel, the traders approach Kalya for hundred skins of male deer for a particular religious ceremony. Kalya knows well that the deal would fetch him more money. But, he does not yield to the temptation by going against the laws of his community that bans hunting of the deer during the mating season and does not want to incur the curse of Abhaya. He understands that they are all Abhaya's creatures and that he should not destroy them for his greed.

Still, the civilized people continue to engage themselves in the depletion of natural resources, by felling trees. They hardly realize that deforestation is one of the greatest threats to environment and that it would rob Shabars of their environment. But, the children of the forest are sensitive to changes. They sense that the forest is receding and that the town of Ararha is advancing and that they have to go in search of some virgin forest. It does not cease with that. Even their simple way of living is influenced by the city – dwellers. Phuli who is described to be wearing all natural accessories palm – frond earrings and wooden bangles seems to be craving for brass anklets once she mingles too much with the women of the town. Kalya, instantaneously warns her saying, “ ‘ No. An akhetiya's wife never wears brass or bronze. Doesn't Ma warn us to stay away from metal things?’ ”(96) The influence of the town dwellers does not stop with Phuli alone. In the novel, *Mahasweta Devi* ruefully remarks as,

No, the town and its people would spread out and the dwellers at the edge would set their eyes on the others' 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. 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).

This is not the plight of Shabars alone. Many other tribals in India too face similar challenges. But, how do they sustain their environment is worth mulling over. In *The Book of the Hunter*, Danko Shabar cares for the forest and its resources. He is continually anxious about the dwindling Shabar tribe that value forests. So, his main concern at the outset is to increase the number of the Shabars by giving birth to new generations of Shabars. The forests in which the Shabars live happily and majestically are vanishing. Upholding the tribal beliefs, *Mahasweta Devi* discloses how Danko hankers for a medicinal herb that would increase his longevity so that he can live longer and give birth to many children and create a Shabar settlement in some Abhaya's jungle. Moreover *Mahasweta Devi* also suggests afforestation as one of the strategies to sustain the environment through Danko who is found growing medicinal herbs.

But how far can one follow Danko Shabar's footsteps in reality is to be considered. A close scrutiny of *The Book of the Hunter* exposes that Mahasweta Devi has some message for the readers. Both the forest and the sylvan children of the forest who are affected due to the rampant growth of urbanization must be safeguarded. Of course the novel tells the stories of human beings in the forest and in the towns and also of their condition but it certainly touches the hearts of the readers. One tends to empathise with the tribals and feel for them when they leave behind the Chandir Bon and go out in search of a new forest. The novel not just changes the attitudes of the people but it also changes the readers' hearts. It is these people with the changed heart who can sustain their environment and also allow the sylvan children to live peacefully in their pristine environment. Should not one plant atleast a tree and learn to imbibe the sense of oneness that the tribals share with the forest and thus keep going a green environment for posterity?

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