Ecofeminist Concerns and Subaltern Perspectives on ‘Third World’ Indigenous Women: A Study of Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi

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Ecofeminist Concerns and Subaltern Perspectives on ‘Third World’ Indigenous Women: A Study of Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi

By Bholanath Das¹ and Sahel Md Delabul Hossain²

Abstract

The lives of Aboriginals, as an indigenous form of a subaltern identity, have been less documented in narratives so far. Indigenous subaltern identity forms an alter-identity in which indigenous women’s identity is even more silenced in the social order of gender hierarchy. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in their book Ecofeminism locate the “Third World Woman” (in India) as a stakeholder of indigenous identity. The knowledge of Third World women in nurturing biodiversity drastically differs from both the Androcentric and Eurocentric models of bio-conservation. Indigenous women and the indigenous flora are both objects of genocidal violence, identity dissolution, and cultural extinction as their contribution to conservation is not recognized. As Gayatri Spivak in her seminal book Can the Subaltern Speak? voices, “The subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow.” Mahasweta Devi, renowned Indian author and social activist, portrays the marginalized Indigenous and their struggle for survival. The Indigenous are dispossessed and the indigenous women are even more displaced. Indigenous women characters of Devi’s selected works such as The Book of the Hunter and The Witch, belonging to the Shabar, Santal, Oraon, and Munda tribal communities, live in tune with ethnocentric ecological order. They are the forest dwellers who think of the forest as a unique bio-habitat in harmony with women, thereby preserving Mother Nature.

Keywords: Subalterns, Subaltern Women, Ecofeminism, Indigenous, Mahasweta Devi, Tribal communities

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Introduction

Renowned literary figure Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) brings forward the world of the Indigenous and tribal peoples by including their lives in her stories, locating their culture as the agent of preservation for ecological concerns, and voicing the concerns of the marginalized and the silenced. An Indian author in Bengali and an activist, Mahasweta Devi’s main concerns lay in her studies of Adivasi or the Indigenous and the marginalized, focusing on their women. She lived in the Adivasi villages in West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh for many decades. She fought for the rights and empowerment of the tribal people, particularly for women. Many of her works have significant projections of ecofeminist perspectives. To consider some of Devi’s selected works in the framework of ecofeminism, ecocriticism as a term has to be expanded. The term ecocriticism was first introduced by William Rueckert in an article “Literature and Ecology: An Expert in Eco-Criticism Studies” (1978, p.105). Since its publication, ecocriticism has been a significant scholarly field in criticism, literature, and culture. Recent developments in ecological issues and how these issues affect lives open up new dimensions of critical theories on the environment. Ecofeminism is a theory and a resistance discourse focused on the exploitation and subjugation of both nature and women. It considers both the environment and women as the othered or marginalized without any ethical epistemology. So, the term ecofeminism coined by French feminist Francoise d’Eaubonne refers to an interdisciplinary philosophical movement in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974) that connects environmental issues with gender.

Patriarchy, in dealing with both women and nature, preaches gender imperialism with the exploitation of the environment and the othering of women in society. The patriarchal notion places men closer to culture and women closer to nature which give rise to power binaries such as men/women and nature/culture. This has enhanced the objectification of both women and nature. The paradigm shift from androcentric to ecocentric with feminists’ intervention into environmental contexts paves the way for a more sustainable development as stated in the *World Survey Report of Women in Development 2014: Gender Equality and Sustainable Development* (2014).

Masculinity as a dominating cultural tool is debated in ecofeminism. The historic ecofeminist movements in India like the Chipko movement and the Save Ganga Movement are encouraging in the global map. Vandana Shiva’s works *Ecofeminism* (2014) and *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1989) contribute as critical texts to the Indian context of ecofeminism. Mahasweta Devi’s works are read as a plea for bringing back the ancient or indigenous sacred ways of living and more precisely the indigenous women’s ecoliterate sustainable life. More subtly the study focuses on tribal women and their sustainable life practices. She situates indigenous subaltern women as the doubly denied and deprived of all resources as evidenced in Spivak’s comment “subaltern as women are even more deeply in shadows” (Spivak, 1988, p. 65). The article discusses different aspects such as third world.

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3 Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is an Indian writer in Bengali and an activist. Mahasweta Devi’s main concerns lay in her studies of Adivasi, Dalit, and marginalized citizens focusing on their women. She lived in the Adivasi villages in West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh for many decades. She fought for the rights and empowerment of the tribal people, particularly for women. She was honoured with various literary awards such as the Sahitya Akademi Award (in Bengali), Jnanpith Award, and Ramon Magsaysay Award, along with India’s civilian awards Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan.

4 It was an Indian movement in the 1970s seen as an ecofeminist movement. Villagers and women organized themselves in groups to protect trees and forests.

5 It is a widespread environment movement across the Indian states Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, supported by Ganga Seva Abhiyanam, a Pune-based women’s organization to save the river Ganga from pollution.

6 The term “third world” is being used to refer to Mohanty’s concept of Third World Feminism. Although we acknowledge that the term “third world” has been contested and its political implications have been discussed,
feminism and includes a review of ecofeminism, indigenous identity formation, indigenous culture in India, indigenous women as the custodians of biodiversity, and finally ecofeminist perspectives in Mahasweta Devi’s *The Witch* and *The Book of the Hunter*.

**Third World Feminism**

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, being the first ever third world feminist, initiated a discourse on the difference between Eastern and Western feminism as an Indian. Her essay “Under the Western Eyes: Feminist Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse” (1986) analyzes the phenomena of third world feminism, defining it as drastically different from Western feminism in terms of “underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism and overpopulation” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 5). In 1982 Ann Russo and Chandra Talpade Mohanty initiated an international conference called *Common Differences: Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives*. In 1983, they focused on the recent debates in the collection of the essays called *Common Differences* on the development of feminist theory and politics by third world women:

While the term third world is a much maligned and contested one, we use it deliberately, preferring it to postcolonial or developing countries. Third world refers to the colonized, neocolonized or decolonized countries (of Asia, Africa, and Latin America) whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process, and to black, Asian, Latin, and indigenous peoples in North America, Europe, and Australia. Thus, the term does not merely indicate a hierarchical cultural and economic relationship between "first" and "third" world countries; it intentionally foregrounds a history of colonization and contemporary relationships of structural dominance between first and third world peoples (Mohanty, 1991, p.x).

Questions of race, class, gender, colonialism, and imperialism have been the major constituents for the primary ground of the politics of third world women. There are some indicators which necessarily have to be drawn to define the term in a more understandable way:

In drawing on histories of antiracist, anti-imperialist struggles around the world, the term third world is also a form of self-empowerment. However, the unproblematized use of a term such as third world women could suggest the equation of struggles and experiences of different groups of women, thus flattening and depoliticizing all internal hierarchies. The term could also suggest that "third world" cultures or "ethnicity" is the primary (or only) basis of the politics of third world women. We intend neither. In fact, a number of essays in the collection problematize the very terms of the definition of the "third world," thus clarifying the contests over the meaning of this term (Mohanty, 1991, pp. ix-x).

Unlike the history of the Western feminism, which has been portrayed in greater detail over the last few decades, the histories of third world women’s engagement with feminism are lacking concrete ground. A large body of work on women in developing countries exists but this does not necessarily engage feminist questions. With a broad canvas to “foreground third world feminisms as an analytical and political category,” Mohanty recognizes and explores the “links among the histories and struggles of third world women against racism, sexism,

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*we continue to use the term third world feminism, informed by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies’ understanding of the concept.*
colonialism, imperialism and monopoly capital” (1991, p.4). In addition to these, Mohanty further introduces predominant representations to place the third world women:

Besides being normed on a white, Western (read progressive/modern)/ non-Western (read backward/traditional) hierarchy, these analyses freeze third world women in time, space, and history. For example, in analyzing indicators of third world women’s status and roles, Momsen and Townsend in their *Geography of Gender in the Third World* (1987) designate the following categories of analysis: life expectancy, sex ratio, nutrition, fertility, income-generating activities, education, and the new international division of labor. Of these, fertility issues and third world women's incorporation into multinational factory employment are identified as two of the most significant aspects of "women's worlds" in third world countries (1991, p. 6).

Thus, the notions of third world women are strongly asserted through addressing theoretical questions which broaden the directions to develop and necessitate third world feminism.

**A Review of Ecofeminism and Indigenous Women**

Ecofeminist writings are an integral part of understanding intersectionality in Indian feminism. Ecofeminist literature, more specifically authored by women writers such as Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, and Kamala Markandyaya, carves out the issues of the environment and its inevitable change due to rapid urbanization which creates modern-day problems like pollution and the global climate crisis. They also focus on gender discrimination which creates a divide between the powerful and powerless which later translates to exploitation. Nature, as a mother figure, always has a connection with women and the value of procreation, preservation, and sustenance of life. However, a patriarchal approach negates this conversation and removes women to a peripheral location by considering women to be physically weak subalterns who cannot speak against discrimination and exploitation.

While validating indigenous women’s ecological awareness, Indian mythology traces back to Sita, the Queen of King Rama in the *Ramayana*, who has been referred to as “South Indian tribal” in the book *Imaginary Maps* (2015) by Devi in conversation with Spivak. Sita is epitomized as:

Nature, the flowing river, the fruit-yielding trees, the harvest to be gathered. Among the South Indian tribals, Sita, the Queen of King Rama in the *Ramayana*, is not a human being. She is the wind in the grass, she is the flowing river, the fruit-yielding trees, the harvest to be gathered. She is Nature. Glimpses of their history remain in their songs and ballads. They were advanced in agriculture, though some groups were forest dwelling hunters (Devi, 2015, p.i).

In this context, Sita regarded as Bhumi Devi (goddess earth) has been a subject of exploitation at the hands of Ravana, representing patriarchy. Sita is linked to the exploitation of indigenous women Tejota and Somri in Devi’s works *The Book of the Hunter* and “The Witch”

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7 Sita is a character in the Indian epic Ramayana. She is mythologically believed to be found in a furrow during ploughing of the earth.
8 Rama is a deity in Hinduism.
9 The Ramayana is a Hindu epic.
10 *The Book of the Hunter*, originally in Bengali as *Byadhkhanda* by Mahasweta Devi, was later translated into English by Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta, published in 2009.
11 The short story “The Witch” was translated from the original Bengali *Daini* by Ipsita Chanda.
respectively. Sita, the “flowing river” in *Ramayana* and Somri, and the *daini*\(^{12}\) in “The Witch” who is referred to as “the forest” as “she felt much safer in the forest” (Devi, 1998, p.102), are equated with indigenous women’s approach to an ecoliterate society.

Spread across Devi’s major works, indigenous women have remained at the backdoor as the precursors of indigenous ecofeminism and thereby open up a new dimension of interdisciplinary academic discourse. Devi’s voice deepens the indigenous ways of living in order to bring back interconnectedness with nature, baring the myth of modern development which Mies and Shiva call “maldevelopment or capitalist commodification” (Mies & Shiva, 2014, xi). Speaking about the economic status of tribal societies, Mies and Shiva encourage sustainable livelihoods. For women, who are traditionally considered as the household managers, survival entails conserving biological resources:

> The economies of many Third World communities depend on biological resources for their sustenance and well-being. In these societies, biodiversity is simultaneously a means of production, and an object of consumption. The survival and sustainability of livelihoods is ultimately connected to the conservation and sustainable use of biological resources in all their diversity. Tribal and peasant societies’ biodiversity-based technologies, however, are seen as backward and primitive and are, therefore, displaced by progressive technologies that destroy both diversity and people's livelihoods (Mies & Shiva, 2014, p.165).

To illustrate Shiva’s observation of peasant societies’ biodiversity livelihoods, Devi’s comments in *Imaginary Maps* present that:

> As long as the forests were there, the hunting tribes did not suffer much, because the forests used to provide them with food, shelter, timber, hunting. But now that the forests are gone …the tribes are in dire distress (Devi, 2015, p.ii).

Considering women’s close kinship with nature, cultural ecofeminism places both women and nature’s biological cycles as analogous (i.e. menstruation, procreation, and lactation), which bind both of them emotionally and physically as validated by Ariel Salleh (qtd. in Agarwal):

> Women’s monthly fertility cycle, the tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, the wrench of childbirth and the pleasure of suckling of an infant, three things already ground women’s consciousness in the knowledge of being coterminous with nature. However tacit or unconscious this identity may be for women… it is nevertheless a fact of life. (qtd. in Agarwal, 1992, p.121).

The indigenous women’s knowledge in sustaining an ecoliterate society through preserving Nature is discussed by Mies and Shiva:

> Women’s knowledge has been the mainstay of the indigenous dairy industry... in forestry too, women’s knowledge is crucial to the use of biomass for feed and fertilizer. Knowledge of the feed value of different fodder species, the fuel value of firewood types, and of food products and species is essential to agriculture–related forestry in which women are predominantly active (Mies & Shiva, 2014, p.167).

\(^{12}\)A Bengali word meaning witch, believed to be a woman with evil powers.
Indigenous Women are the Custodians of Biodiversity

Indigenous women’s function in the development and conservation of biodiversity has been considered as non-existent. Indigenous people’s notion of biodiversity drastically differs from the dominant patriarchal notion of biodiversity conservation. The existing world view never considers their practice of biodiversity as scientific as it has not been produced in a laboratory or established through scientific logic. But the indigenous ways are very much in harmony with the basic worldview. It is not being carried out by the mainstream or so-called dominant culture but by the village women, more specifically by indigenous women. Indigenous setting, sacred beliefs, and practices are devoid of exploitative patriarchal practice as the core of the ecological cycles responsible for sustainable production. Their labor and expertise have been defined by nature and are embedded ecologically and culturally in rituals and festivals celebrating the renewal of life. Women preserving seeds means conserving diversity and harmonious balance based on their knowledge and skills as indigenous crop-improvement strategies.

Gender studies broadens the scope of such understanding that women in India are major producers of food in the context of value, volume, and hours worked (Mies & Shiva, 2014, p.166). Indigenous women’s knowledge in farming culture in rural India involves basic practices and logic in seed preparation, germination and soil choice, weather forecast for plantation of saplings, micro-climatic factors, and fine motor-coordination. This is rather intrinsically different from those taught in agriculture or farming science at higher education institutions. Scientific farming culture in the laboratory largely fails to nurture physical dexterity to sow seeds, or the knowledge of the nature of plant disease, pruning, staking, companion planting, and judgement in relation to weather. In forestry, women’s knowledge is vital to the use of biomass for feed and fertilizer. The life of the tribe is deeply linked to the life of the soil and the forest (Mies & Shiva, 2014, p.103). Through this they have continued to establish a guiding principle of biodiversity, telling the world to get back to the indigenous way of living and try to preserve nature.

In countries like India, most small farmers are women, even though their role has been ignored in official records of development programs. The displacement of women and other small farmers from agricultural growth is having a serious impact on food consumption. Control over the food is gradually taken out of the hands of third world women. More precisely the third world peasant women and forest dwellers have suffered the most due to the restrictive trade laws. The poorest have to be more creative with their means of survival. Women have been essential innovators and protectors of seed and genetic resources without any formal knowledge of farming and marketing. Limitations of trade ownership cause hindrances to the village farmers or women peasants (Mies & Shiva, 2014, p. 238).

In continuation of this discussion, introductory remarks of Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies can be quoted from the book Ecofeminism:

For the Third World women who fight for the conservation of their survival base this spiritual icing-on-the-cake, the divorce of the spiritual from the material is incomprehensible for them, the term Mother Earth does not need to be qualified by inverted commas, because they regard the earth as a living being which guarantee their own and all their fellow creatures survival (2014, p.19).

Continuous marginalization of both women and nature in the androcentric model of development urges third world women to conserve nature. After all, the survival and sustainability of their livelihoods mainly rely on the sustainable use of biological resources. The indigenous women do have the intrinsic knowledge to bring forth a highly productive society that has been displaced by progressive technologies (Mies & Shiva 2014, p.165).
Recent ecological work in Green Studies, Sustainable Development, Biopolitics, and Ecopoetics has led to a critical theory on the environment. Ecofeminism as resistance discourse speaks of the domination, subjugation, and exploitation of nature and women. Evolution of the ecofeminist ideology in India opens up broader perspectives to analyze the interconnectedness between women and nature. Ecofeminism addresses how the marginalized and exploited women advocate for a harmonious ecoliterate social structure. Ecofeminism liberates women and nature from patriarchal destruction. According to the tenets of ecofeminism, women have reproductive and nurturing roles which bring them closer to the pulse of nature. Women as nurturers are more sensitive to the consequences of ecological destruction.

Formation of Indigenous Identity

It is very significant to know who the indigenous people are and the main traits which form their indigenous identity. Hilary N. Weaver in an article “Indigenous Identity: What Is It, and Who Really Has It?” has broadened the possibilities of defining the term “indigenous identity”:

Indigenous identity is a truly complex and somewhat controversial topic. There is little agreement on precisely what constitutes an indigenous identity, how to measure it, and who truly has it. Indeed there is not even a consensus on appropriate terms. Are we talking about Indians, American Indians, Natives, Native Americans, indigenous people, or First Nations people? Are we talking about Sioux or Lakota? Navajo or Duni? Chippewa, Ojibway, or Anishinabe? Once we get sorted out, are we talking about race, ethnicity, cultural identity, tribal identity, acculturation, enculturation, bicultural identity, multi-cultural identity, or some other form of identity? The topic of indigenous identity opens a Pandora’s box of possibilities. This article provides background information on three facets of identity—self identification, community identification, and external identification (Weaver, 2001, p. 240).

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat’s report confirms more than 370 million people across the globe as indigenous people. Scattered worldwide from the Amazon forest, to the Purulia in West Bengal India (tribal belt), to the Australian aboriginals, indigenous peoples speak more than four hundred languages and practice distinct cultures and festivals. The term indigenous is often used to refer to the first people or first nations, aboriginal people, ethnic people, *adivasi/janajati*. Indigenous people have also been described by other names such as hunter, food gatherer, nomadic people, hill tribes, or peasants. The Indigenous can include native tribes such as the Lakota in the USA, the Mayas in Guatemala, the Ayamaras in Bolivia, the Aborigines and Torres Straits islanders of Australia, the Maori of New Zealand, and the *Adivi* or the tribal people of India. They are also sometimes called “native” as they have been living in that land since ancient times before the invasion of colonial rule.

A commonly accepted definition of indigenous identity by Jose R. Martinez Cobo is cited in his report, *The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*. The reference of this definition is found in *Study on the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Population* which states that:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that develop on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies in those territories or

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13 A Bengali word meaning the first peoples or ancient people or aboriginals.
parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined

to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and

their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples in accordance

with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems (Cobo, 1972, p.2).

The indigenous people scattered in different parts of India such as Birbhum, Purulia,

Midnapore in West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha are known as Tribals. The most important

characteristic of their communities is their communal identity. They have never struggled for

individual identity or possessed land individually as they consider their land a property of their

community. This practice of indigenous people is known as “communal land tenure” (Raj,

2019, p.92). Defining the tribals’ strong sense of attachment to their community, L.M.

Khubchandani in his book Indigenous People (2009) states: “Tribals have a strong sense of a

distinct identity. This is generally expressed by attributing an ‘in-group’ label to their members

and the mother tongue spoken by them. They call themselves by words which literally mean

‘us, men, people’” (Khubchandani, 2009, p.4).

For the indigenous people of India, land means life as they inhibit a land full of rich

natural resources and minerals. The land is not only a place for them to inhabit, but it also

constructs their identity since they have been evicted out of their main territory. While speaking

about another component of indigenous identity formation of Indian tribes such as Santal,

Munda, and Shabar, T.N. Khosho points out in Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle of Applied

Human Ecology a kind of self-determination and “resilience of survival and continuity in the

face of challenges posed by the contemporary technological milieu. These groups primarily

depend upon the ecosystem in which they live. In this sense, they are essentially ecosystem

people” (Khosho, 1995, p.59). The eco-cultural and traditional knowledge of the indigenous

people encourage them to conserve nature, the most significant feature to form indigenous

identity. G. N. Devy in his Painted Words: An Anthology of the Tribal Literature (2002) speaks

of traditional knowledge of crafts, music, dance and ethnomedicinal practices as “the

intellectual effort of the indigenous and local communities” (2002, p.12). He further mentions

that tribal rituals are performed in rhythm with seasons among the indigenous Rathwa Bils in

Gujrat. Another noticeable aspect of indigenous culture is legal pluralism(an autonomous

socio-political and judicial system) among the indigenous people in India (Raj, 2019, p.98).

Acknowledgement of these important aspects of indigenous identity and culture in India is

necessary to evaluate indigeneity. In their tribal society, Adivasi “women are central to the

economy. They take part in agriculture production, gather forest produce, do wage

labour...singlehandedly bear the whole burden of domestic work, child rearing and do the

marketing for their families” (Kutty, 2016, p.30).

Ecofeminist Perspectives in Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi: The Witch and The Book

of the Hunter

Mahasweta Devi’s acquaintance with tribal people took place in 1965 in an

impoverished Palamau district in Bihar. To her utter dismay, she observed the tribals being

forced into accepting the capitalist ideology of marginalization and oppression in the name of

development. In the story “The Witch,” published in Bitter Soil, a tribal girl named Somri was

raped by the Mishra’s son who also got her pregnant: “She is dumb! She can’t speak. Her body

grew but not her”(Devi, 1998, p.122). Her banishment to the forest was exile, imposed upon

14Tribal peoples are not indigenous to the region they inhabit but they share common characteristics with

indigenous peoples, such as having social, cultural and economic traditions different from other sections of the

mainstream community. They identify themselves with their ancestral territories.

her by the elitist society. Being marginalized, the tribals, more precisely the tribal women, have
remained muted and isolated from the mainstream. Devi lays bare the heinous treatment and
the plight of Somri: “Anh-anh-anh-anh-anh! the shriek, the scream, a human cry, after all is
human beings who turn into dainis. Suddenly, the scream stops and an awful silence. As if a
newborn child is crying” (Devi, 1998, p. 119).

The pahaan\textsuperscript{16} could feel that the fobbed screams are not of a daini, but his daughter
Somri. He witnessed an unbelievable scene: “on the floor of the cave kneels pahaan. A woman
is lying bare. Between her legs still connected by the umbilical cord, is the newborn infant”
(Devi, 1998, p.120). The fact that Somri was being set ablaze, still connected to her infant child
by the umbilical cord, is a transparent picture of how men have not safeguarded their women.
Gradually villagers’ fear of the daini thins away, and they take care of Somri and her newborn
as the profound peace surging into the forest. The villagers earlier thought that the reason for
drought was the daini, but it is actually the Mishars’ sons who are representatives of patriarchal
Indian society. As women are “traditionally regarded as a field” and men “as the seed”, the
gender positions result in and fortify “oppressive bondage for women” by men (Nubile, 2003,
p. 23). In this story, as land is ploughed and then seeds are sown, the daini’s body was ravaged
by the polluting seeds of male tyrants.

Somri stigmatized as a daini, in the story “The Witch,” genuinely felt much protected
in the forest: “The daini began to run towards the forest” (Devi, 1998, p. 102). As personified,
she takes refuge in the lap of Mother Nature (the forest) to escape from the tyranny of the
society in regards to indigenous women. She discovers solace in the midst of the forest as the
mother protector. Devi’s narration of the witch hunting episode and finally her escape into the
forest creates a fictional bioregion and thereby draws a sublime interconnectedness between
women and nature. Judith Plant in Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism
(1989) makes an acute observation connecting the exploitation of women and ecology: “The
rape of the earth, in all its forms, becomes a metaphor for woman in all its many guises in layer
after layer, a truly sick society is revealed, a society of alienated relationships all linked to
rationalism that separates ‘man’ from nature” (Plant, 1989, p. 238).

A critical analysis of how Somri, a Munda\textsuperscript{17} woman, is being subjugated by the
patriarchal social structure, can be found in “The Poetics and Politics of Space: A Reading of
Mahasweta Devi’s Subaltern Stories”:

Though the community as a whole is endangered by the threat of daini, it is the woman
who invariably faces the impact of this threat twice over. She finds her space and her
movements further restricted within the society already circumscribed by the
mainstream bulldozing, despite the egalitarian character of the tribal society. The
suspicions and sanctions are directed more brutally towards her than towards her male
counterpart. Her movement is more closely watched, for the menstruating woman is
believed to be more susceptible to the influence of daini (Rekha, 2010, p. 146).

Somri belonging to the tribal community is not only bound by the socio-spatial configuration
but is also threatened by the elitism of the mainstream. Her deafness, mental disability, physical
assault, and the fact that she is called a daini are all examples or metaphors for patriarchal
oppression. It’s believed that due to Somri’s taking shelter in a forest, the whole village of
Khurda is going through drought:

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\textsuperscript{16} A Munda community priest.

\textsuperscript{17} An indigenous tribe mostly in Jharkhand, in some districts of West Bengal, Odisha in India.
The whole village comes to believe that there is a witch roaming in the forest who will bring misfortune to the whole region. Everything that happened along with the famine is due to the *daini*, the witch: if there is a *daini* in the vicinity, astonishing things happen, which no one has ever seen, though everyone has heard about them (Devi, 1998, p. 57).

The witch-hunt becomes a metaphor for the subjugation of indigenous women. The forest becomes a place of solace for her. Being chased out of her community by the ecologically abusive dominant culture, she has to roam in the forest, her Mother Nature, her bio-habitat. In *The Book of the Hunter*, Devi brings out contrasting studies between the tribal ecoliterate community and the Brahmanical\(^\text{18}\) community of Arahara. The indigenous tribe Shabar\(^\text{19}\) lived on the outskirts of Ararha in the forest. Chandir Bon, obeying the forest goddess Abhayachandi, safeguards all of them including the animals and trees: “the forest, the animals, the birds, and the Shabars—she gives them all courage and keeps them under her wing” (Devi, 2009, p.44). The Shabars believed that the forest would not only provide them a safe shelter, but also their living entity, a spiritual solace and sustenance for livelihood. Shabars’ ways of living are different from the capitalist philosophy of grabbing and acquiring. They consider the forest as their mother as they never hunt for pleasure, maintaining a respectful relationship between flora and fauna. In the story, Tejota’s husband Megha killed a pregnant deer and was denied the right to become tribal chief. Also in the last hunt, the clan was forbidden to kill the elephant as it might take shelter in Abhaya’s fortress. The indigenous belief system encourages the preservation of both flora and fauna to maintain an environmentally conscious community. The reference to the pregnant deer, Abhaya the goddess, and elephant all garlanded into one whole establishes the idea of indigenous sacred ways of living bringing back the interconnectedness of feminine power:

In the Shabar community, both men and women toiled for their daily victuals. They married whomever they wanted. They built separate huts after marriage. When the husband and wife quarreled, the husband thrashed the wife; she in turn, struck a blow or two. It was not that sort of society in which the wife had to take all lying down (Devi, 2009, p.83).

The women take the burden of the tribes, the family, and nature to retrieve the right order of things. Daibaki, mother of Mukunda as the head of the family had to look after the family. Her home was “well stocked with paddy rice and mashkolai, arhar and chickpeas” (Devi, 2009, p.13). She was in search of a bride whom she can teach the household chores in order to hold the family together. Mukunda’s wife is looked at as a “serene pond in the neighbourhood.” The mention of Mukunda’s wife with the serene pond presents an interconnectedness between feminine grace and nature.

In 16\(^\text{th}\)-century Bengal, Chandi Bon, the forest inhabited by the Shabars and their indigenous ways of life, is being encroached upon by the town of Ararha. The tribals had to be mixed with the Brhaman family of Mukundaram, two distinct cultures of two different communities. The Shabars are the forest dwellers who live on what Mother Nature provides them: “They don’t know what money is, nor do they see much of it” (Devi, 2009, p.117). Environmental sustainability with their indigenous belief in preserving nature came into effect when Tejota received knowledge and wisdom of the secrets of Abhaya the forest goddess from her father Danku, the chief of the Shabars. The customs, rituals, and rules of Abhyachandi

\(^{18}\)Upper caste community in India.

\(^{19}\)The Shabar people are one of the indigenous tribes who live mainly in Odisha and West Bengal. The traditionally forest-dwelling tribe relies on the forests for their livelihood.
affirm that knowledge is not gendered but reserved for the deserved like Tejota. Her husband Megha sinned by killing a pregnant deer and was immediately stripped of the clan leadership and given to Tejota. As the tribal chief she bears the responsibility of the tribe because her husband could not uphold the moral dignity of the tribal ethos by killing a doe. As the true believer of indigenous tribal culture, Tejota’s husband has been denied the post of tribal chief as he had committed an offense by killing a doe.

The environmentalists’ concerns of the Shabar tribes are well understood when Tejota has been given the charge of leadership, which hints at ecofeminist cultural practices. Leaving behind her marital life after taking the leadership, she ransacks the forest, gets to know the usages of different plants, and learns the ways of the wind and seasons to protect her tribe. For the sake of looking after her tribe, she gives up her personal pleasure. In the long run she becomes the mother of her entire community. The onslaught of the Brahmanical culture could not destroy tribal indigeneity. She unites their whole clan against the mainstream, so-called civilized culture. Tejota is a protector of the indigenous culture of the Shabar tribes whereas her male counterparts could not stand the fact that she deserved to lead their culture and custom. Phuli, as described by the novelist, is as strong as Sal Tree. Entwined by the ivy though beaten by her own husband Kalya, she is another symbol of being subordinated by the patriarchal power structure. From another angle, gender equity exists as Tejota scolds her son Kalya for beating his wife Phuli. She says:

Why won’t you learn lessons from the forest even now? Do the tigers and deer thrash their females mercilessly like you do yours?...When a tiger is hungry, it kills a deer, an elephant eats leaves and twigs from the bamboo and their banyan tree, but there is no needless killing, violence, or destruction (Devi, 2009, p.100).

Thus, Devi’s works acquaint us with the ecoliterate ways of living of the tribals and especially the women in the context of establishing and celebrating women’s identity and empowerment. As Raj notes:

The life-force that leads them to challenge the odds in society is quite unique in the context of third world feminism. The characters of tribal women in her writing are not willing to remain subjugated or subdued in society. They are courageous enough to revenge against the oppression and humiliation meted out to them. All of them celebrate women empowerment to a large extent (Raj, 2019, p.224).

Conclusion

The indigenous women of the communities of the Shabars, Santals, Oroans, and Mundas, who live in tune with an ethnocentric ecological order in the selected works of Mahasweta Devi, represent the dispossessed other. Their voices in the pages of Devi are narratives of their institutionalized oppression. They are the forest dwellers who think of the forest as a unique bio-habitat existing in their interpersonal relations with women and thereby preserving Mother Nature. In Devi’s The Book of the Hunter, Tejota, a Shabar woman, creates a fictional bioregion through her ways of interconnectedness with their nature Goddess Abhaya. Shabars are against the androcentric and hierarchical structured community of Arhara. Shabars’ way of seeing Abhaya as the creator and protector of the entire world is similar to the reflection of the ecofeminist concern of the Mother Goddess (of creation and protection). The indigenous women in another work of Devi, “The Witch,” are doubly denigrated and exploited,
not only by gender discrimination but also by capitalist Indian society. Somri branded as a daini in “The Witch” feels much safer in the forest than in a human habitat. Thus, the study critically brings out how the indigenous women harmonize their lives into creating an ecoliterate community without any need for theoretical knowledge of bio-conservation. The indigenous women in selected works of Devi transcend from a socio-economic position of being seen as non-existent to being enlightened. They have conceptualized a collective consciousness by educating and advocating against the slaughterers of women, indigenous women, and nature.

References