



**AN APPLICATION OF ECOFEMINISM TO THE STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S
STORY 'DOULOTI THE BOUNTIFUL**

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ABSTRACT

This present paper applies the tenets of Ecofeminism to the study of Mahasweta Devi's story "Douloti the Bountiful". Mahasweta's fiction dealing with the contemporary period show how the tribal people have become helpless victims of the most horrifying class-exploitation in modern India. From being free-living, autonomous communities they have been reduced to being the members of the lowest groups of India are labouring classes. Their lives lose meaning and significance as the links with their old life are completely severed and they face extreme forms of oppression and exploitation. Number of her short stories deal with the devastating reality of the contemporary tribal exploitation in India, which was the fall out of the forcible eviction of the tribal from his homelands. They portray the exploitation that the tribal people and other oppressed classes and castes are forced to face in the name of class, tribe and gender. Nature is not a source of life any more for the modern day tribal, nor is it a comforting environment as they eke out miserable existences in the agricultural fields and industrial settlements of modern India. The women-cantered stories tell a tale of sexual exploitation within the general blanket of class oppression. Her stories can be better understood if read under the lenses of Ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism is a term in which role of women and nature in existing society is evaluated. In patriarchal society women's work, knowledge and their surrounding environment are ignored. It is a study which shows that relation of women with environment is far more intimate than that of men. Needless to say that in ancient India people revered nature as 'Mother'. Nature is always personified as a woman whose basic task is to reproduce and nurture. So are the tasks of women. Her functions are seen as natural to her. Nature is believed to be female and culture is taken as masculine. Eco feminist thought emerges from this basic assumption that both women and nature are equally oppressed by male ways of thinking and action. It is a movement that examines a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. Degradation and oppression of both nature and women are of major concern today.

Ecofeminism serves as a tool to catch the attention of the world to crucial environmental issues and to the oppression of women through the analysis of literature. In this paper, Mahasweta Devi's story "Douloti the bountiful" is discussed under the lens of ecofeminism.

KEYWORDS: - *Ecofeminism, Oppression of women, Nature, Environment, Ecocriticism and ecological activism, Exploitation.*

“Ecofeminism argue that patriarchal society’s values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature.”(Parmod K.Nayar, 249)

This present paper applies the tenets of Ecofeminism to the study of Mahasweta Devi’s story “Douloti the Bountiful”. Ecofeminism is a term in which role of women and nature in existing society is evaluated. In patriarchal society women’s work, knowledge and their surrounding environment are ignored. It is a study which shows that relation of women with environment is far more intimate than that of men. It is perhaps the most important approach with in Eco criticism and ecological activism. The works of Vandana Shiva, Mary Mellor, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and others has generated nuanced readings of the relationship between gender and nature.

The growing environmental destruction and struggles for survival and subsistence point to the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply interlinked. Movements all over the world that are dedicated to the continuation of life on earth, like the Chipko movement in India, Anti-Militarist movement in Europe and the US, movement against dumping of hazardous wastes in the US, and Green Belt movement in Kenya, are all labelled as “Eco feminist” movements.

“Elaine Showalter’s model of the three developmental stages of feminist criticism provides a useful scheme for describing three analogous phases in Eco criticism. The first stage in feminist criticism, the “images of women” stage, is concerned with representations, concentrating on how women are portrayed in canonical literature. Analogous efforts in Eco criticism study how nature is represented in literature.

Showalter’s second stage in feminist criticism, the women’s literary tradition stage, likewise serves the important function of consciousness rising as it rediscovers, reissues, and reconsiders literature by women. Similar efforts are being made to recuperate the hitherto neglected genre of nature writing.

The third stage that Showalter identifies in feminist criticism is the theoretical phase, which is far reaching and complex, drawing on a wide range of theories to raise fundamental questions about the symbolic construction of gender and sexuality within literary discourse.”
(The Eco criticism Reader xxiv)

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masculine. Cultural values teach man to exploit nature and women to their own selfish purpose, whereas nature helps to sustain and provide essentials for the human race.

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The Palamu I have depicted in my stories-is a mirror of tribal India. (*Imaginary Maps iv*)

"Mahasweta Devi's stories in *"Imaginary Maps"* are not only linked by the common thread of profound ecological loss, the loss of the forest as foundation of life, but also of the complicity, however apparently remote of the power lines of local developers with the forces of global capital. And it is Douloti in whom the love of land, of Nature indistinguishable from parents and home, is seen at its strongest and most vulnerable" (204).

Douloti the Bountiful was set in the village of Deora in Palamu (Bihar) in post-independent India. The story portrays the plight of Ganori Nagesia and his daughter Douloti. Ganori was a bonded-labourer. He was sent to jail because of stealing wayer- buffaloes from the market. In order to do the purification for returning from jail and also to feast his people because his eldest daughter and eldest son got married, he borrowed three hundred rupees from the landlord Munabar Singh Chandela. He had to follow the custom, "if you go to jail and stay there you have to feed your community when you return. This is such that you can't get around it. Ganori became a kamiya when he took that money"(21).

The way Ganori Nagesia became Crook Nagesia tells about the exploitation and oppression the tribals suffered at the hands of the others. Ganori Nagesia was nicknamed Crook Nagesia because he was crippled in an accident. He was forced by the landlord to carry an ox yoke on his shoulder because the young ox of his landlord was eaten by a tiger due to his carelessness. While he tried to pull the cart, Ganori fell on his face and the axle plunged into his back. After this incident' Ganori spent three months in Tehri hospital. He came out of the hospital with his body broken and misshapen. Ganori's condition was literalized as slave due to the cruel punishment meted out to him. Because Ganori borrowed money from Munabar and

because of the increase in interest and the recurrent social and economic needs, Ganori became his slave for an indefinite period of time. Thus the tribal suffered a lot under the hands of the landlords. People like Ganori Nagesia subscribed to the system without questioning anything because to become a kamiya, for the tribal, is 'fate's decree,' (21).

One of the villagers, Bono Nagesia, who did not bother to follow the tradition, was taught a lesson. Bono Nagesia who went to work in a coal mine at Dhanbad under a contractor earned a lot of money when he unintentionally killed a hooligan. Bono came back to his village Seora with his money to build a house. He thought that the bond-lord Munabar might take away his belongings like pots and pans but not a house. As a precautionary measure, he got the permission of the landlord Munabar to build the house. Not after Bono built the house, Munabar's men locked him up in a room and set fire to the house. Then he was forced to put his thumb print on a sheet of white paper in receipt of twenty five rupees and was declared a bond- slave thereafter. The landlord tells Bono:

"Take these twenty-five rupees. You are borrowing this because your house burnt down. From now on you are my bonds slave. You will repay by the body's labour. I could have made your aunt, wife, and son my bonds slave too. But they have no strength in their bodies; they won't be able to work hard. I won't ever get back the cost of giving them snacks and their breakfast of thin gruel" (28).

Even the unending labour of Bono's body, the bodies of his wife, his sons and daughters would not adequate for the repayment of the loan as it had been acquiring metaphysically endless proportions. Hence he decided not 'to slave for his bond' (29), and not to perform the marriage of his son Dhano with Douloti and he vanished from Seora. He became a wandering ministerial by joining father Bomfuller, a reformist journalist missionary.

"After Bono's final departure from Seora village..... many things happened in Seora village. Munabar's white horse died. The lightning-struck tree suddenly fell over one night and suddenly the bear-players came to the village. Although Munabar made the bears dance in front of his own house, the whole village could after all see."(30)

In the 1962 elections that took place, the tribals did not have any choice but to vote for the man of Munabar's chice. The tribals like all other things, had no say in that also. When Crook Nagesia was no longer useful to his master, he was freed from bondage to Munabar by Paramananda Misra, who was a relative to the local priest. He did so only to take over Douloti, the younger daughter of Crook Nagesia with an offer of marriage. Crook Nagesia was too ineffectual to resist against the local conspiracy between the rajput bond-lord and the Brahmin

‘god’. The thirteen year old Douloti, the new- found bond-slave was thrown as a piece of meat in the flesh market of the market- town of Madhpura by her master Parmananda. As Chari says, “she is thrown as the live sexual of a contractor who appropriates more than his money’s worth of sensual pleasure from Douloti’s body.” (66)

Ganori and Douloti’s fate is that of so many tribal men and women. Human beings are not considered for their worth and the social system only is to be blamed. Mahasweta Devi brings this out in the story: “The social system that makes Crook Nagesia a kamiya is made by men. Therefore, do Douloti, Somni, Reoti, have to quench the hunger of male flesh. Otherwise Parmananda does not get money.” (62). since these tribals considered everything as the outcome of fate, they never tried to resist against the system. Douloti ‘s scepticism regarding the measures that could be taken up by the government to prevent the practice of bonded labour as a result of the stastical data provided by the reformist missionary Bomfuller and his associates is to be considered in this context.

The story came to an end in 1975, just as Indira Gandhi’s Emergency began. The twenty seven year old Douloti’s body had been ploughed for 40 thousand rupees and she died of venereal disease and hunger. Once Douloti was beautiful and useful; she was used, exploited, plundered and wasted. But once she caught her disease and could no longer be utilized to the maximum, she was abandoned. She went to Tohri hospital, where she was not only rejected but also robbed. So she decided to go back to her birth place, Seora. She walked to the village of Tohri where the school teacher Mohan Srivastava of Basic Primary School was preparing for the celebrations of Independence Day by drawing a huge map of India in front of the school. Douloti who was exhausted and weak struggled to walk and fell down on the map. When Mohan Srivastava, the school teacher came down from his room, he found Douloti lying dead on the map of India. The author describes the manner in which Douloti’s body was lying on the ground:

“Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread-eagled, kamiya whore Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs,” (94)

The hard- won independence has nothing to do with people like Douloti who are yet to taste freedom. The author’s question, “Today on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planning the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India” (94) is quite significant. For people like Douloti, freedom remains only as an illusion. The passage echoing the morning after Douloti’s first rape where ‘she was stretched out quite naked’ suggests the complete identification of the exploited

adivasi woman with India; she is India- meaning that the poor, exploited workers compose the majority of the people of India and that Independence is a lie for the vast majority of people in India or at the very least that it is meaningless to them.

Mahasweta Devi uses the image of the bonded-sex-worker lying dead on the map of India to condemn exploitation and to destroy the myth of a free India for all. Douloti dies on the chalk dust of the map of a mythical India, and in other words, “Everything would have reminded a fairy tale, but the conclusion of the fairy tale is life, bloody, pain-filled life” (50). Douloti makes one to reason the new pungent logic behind Mahasweta’s ‘obsession’ with the nation. It would be appropriate to say that this novella can be taken as a mirror to the nation which can be defined by the victims rather by the ruling parasitic groups. In his article “Transcribing resistance: Cartographies of Struggling Bodies and minds in Mahasweta Devi’s *Imaginary Maps*,” Waseem Anwar says:

“Douloti opens in the drought-stricken tribal areas situated in the Palamu district. Poverty rules the region where decolonization has least prevented free women from being treated as commodity. When a woman gets raped, the judiciary system does not support her because of the general consensus that only a woman with loose character gets raped..... As the story proceeds we figure out that in the process of decolonization and a systematic neo-colonial control, Douloti, the land and Douloti the character have been shrunk to the status of a product. Land or body, Douloti is delineated as a space of intervention for its exporters and exploiters. As a land, she is vulnerable to its intruders for crossing its borders, and as a body, she is forced to cross the boundaries of ethical values of free will in order to benefit others through self-plunder (89-90)”

“Douloti the Bountiful” establishes a parallel between the exploitation of *adivasi* men who became bonded-labourers of the rich upper-caste landowners whose labour and the fruits of their labour are alienated from them and the sexual exploitation of the *adivasi* women who are used or abused as they are poor who own nothing- neither the means of their livelihood, nor their own bodies.

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