

**An Eco-Critical Study of Mahasweta Devi's "Pterodactyl"****By: 1. Vandana Vats**

Ph. D. Scholar  
Singhania University,  
Pacheri Bari, Jhunjhunu (Raj.)  
Enroll No. 1401076924 (2014)

**2. Dr. Jiwan Chand Bakhshi**

Asstt. Prof. of English  
Govt. College, Narwana  
Distt. Jind, (Haryana)

**ABSTRACT**

Man-Nature relationship and the presentation of this relationship in literature are the underlining principles of Eco-criticism. Mahasweta Devi beautifully portrays this communion of nature and man in many of her works. Focusing her works on the plight of tribals, she studies this relationship from very close quarters. The tribals are natural guardians of rich flora and fauna of our dense forests. Their folktales, the myth, the dreams and the visions find an expression in *Pterodactyl*, Puran, Sahay and Pirtha, a story collected in *Imaginary Maps*. Pterodactyl is an extinct reptile bird of the Pterosauria class from Mesozoic era. This flying reptile is visible only to Puran Sahay and Bikhia in tribal region of Pirtha in Madhya Pradesh. Through Puran Sahay, the reporter, and Shankar, the tribal boy, Devi strongly comments on tribals' life and problems. Caught in the whirlpool of government sponsored developmental schemes, the tribals struggle hard to protect their primitive and pristine culture. The paper seeks to highlight the impact of modernization of the 'ecological equilibrium' of tribal culture, which hitherto, has been beautifully managed and maintained by tribal people.

**Key works:** Tribal, eco-criticism, exploitation, environment, myth, culture, folklore, ecology, notified, denotified and dignity.

**RESEARCH PAPER**

Pterodactyl is an abstract of my entire tribal experience. Through the Nagesia experience I have explained other tribal experiences as well. I have not kept to the customs of one tribe alone. In the matter of the respect for the dead, for example, I have mixed together the habits of many tribes. If read carefully, Pterodactyl will communicate the agony of the tribals, of marginalized people all over the world. (*Imaginary Maps* XIV)

Mahasweta Devi is known for her path-breaking and voluminous work focussing on the plight of the dispossessed tribes and landless farmers of India. She herself visited many districts of Bihar and Bengal and saw the pitiable condition of India's tribal population. These people became her primary concern. First as a journalist, she published many articles related to the miserable life of the tribals and how the politician-bureaucrats-landlord nexus exploited and oppressed the poor and the women for their own self-interests. She started a journal, *Bortika*, for voicing the problems of these indigenous people. In this journal Mahesweta Devi publishes the unedited tales written by the tribals in their own language. She is also one of the founders of the Denotified and Notified Tribal Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG) which works for improving the condition of these people through education, legal intervention and activism. Her view is not an outsiders' view, it is an inside view of the plight of tribal people. She knows their language, their folklore, their myth, their dreams and aspirations and, above, all their frustration with the system. She is popularly known as 'Didi' among them. Focussing her writing on the questions of suffering of the tribal people, Mahasweta Devi writes about the uncongenial conditions where this suffering humanity is bound to lead a hellish life. Through her works, Mahesweta Devi exposes our indifference ignorance about the rich tribal culture and tribal civilization. Tribals are taken to be uncivilized and unsophisticated by our so called civilized world. But as we try to understand them from close quarters, we find that they are very close to nature and lead a simple and balanced life. We exploit the nature and natural resources without thinking of the consequences and feel proud of it, whereas the tribals act as the custodians of forests.

In her short story "Pterodactyl" Mahasweta Devi uses myth of the extinct Pterodactyl to depict the misery of the Nagesia tribals of Pirtha region. About Mahasweta's realistic portrayal, Beniwal and Vandana note: "Her stories are no propagandistic illustrations of the ideology; rather the situations speak for themselves, and as they evolve, ideology emanates from them as much as they themselves emanate from it".

Eco-criticism, as a modern phenomenon, is a branch of literary criticism being discussed worldwide showing the connection of literature and environment. Literature, culture and environment are interlinked and exert their bearing on each other. William Rueckert coined this term in 1978 in his famous essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism". Mahesweta Devi, though not much concerned about this theory of literature, focusses on its practical aspect. Most of her writings, as they deal with tribals, show the man-nature relationship always as the background of the themes that she discusses. In a conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, published at the beginning of *Imaginary Maps*, Mahasweta Devi describes:

The tribals lead their lives in harmony with Nature, that is, they loved the Earth, the flora and the fauna and see their own lives in many aspects conforming to the lives of the other species of the animals. The hunting tribes would beg forgiveness from a tree, if they were forced to fell a tree. The tribal would say, you are our friend. I do this because my wife doesn't have any food, my son doesn't have any

food, my daughter starves. Before they killed an animal, they use to pray to the animal, the bird, the fish, the deer. (*Imaginary Maps* ii).

The mainstream Indians fell the trees indiscriminately and kill other species for their selfish gains but the tribals sparingly indulge in the felling of the trees and that also out of the necessity. Mahasweta Devi further contends about the tribals that:

They understand ecology and the environment in a way the mainstream Indians cannot even imagine. (*Imaginary Maps* ii)

Mahasweta's treatment of tribal themes in her works relate to tribal Independence, tribal identity and tribal honour. From her earliest Historical fiction to stories of later period, the tribal people's war for honour continues. Tribals, as colonial subjects, were doubly colonized. They were exploited by mainstream dominant Hindu caste society as well as by the British. The forests which originally belonged to them were slowly and strategically taken away from them. Their relationship with forest did not depend on needs only. It was beyond the needs. It had religious and mythical overtones when they were ousted from their homelands. It caused an emotional upheaval in their psychology.

In this story Mahasweta Devi uses myth to provide the framework for the story. The title 'Pterodactyl' is significant. The extinct creature is resurrected and brought back to symbolize ancient tribal life.

The story "Pterodactyl" is a part of the collection *Imaginary Maps* (1992). It is translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Mahasweta Devi's visit to Tejgadh and her encounter with some paintings there inspired her to write about Pterodactyl. The figures drawn in the paintings are timeless voices which are not heard in the clamour of modernisation. Puran Sahay, a journalist based in Bihar, travels to Pirtha in Madhya Pradesh "to put Pirtha on the map." (112) Puran is invited by his friend Hari Sharan to get the Government to bring some relief to the villagers. The story depicts the loss of tribal culture. The survey map of Pirtha Block is like some extinct animal. Pirtha is in need of a dam but the files concerned with the project are lost in bureaucratic red-tapism. The people of Pirtha are dying of starvation. But Government is not ready to declare it a 'famine area'; for them it is only 'drought hit'. In the beginning, we are told that in the survey map "Pirth Block is like some extinct animal of Gondwana land and the tribals are in the animal's jaws".(99)

Shankar is the only literate person in the tribal community. He comments on the changes that have taken place in the lives of Nagesia tribals and their history. He remembers the time when the tribals lived in perfect harmony with the natural surroundings. They worshipped nature. He speaks:

Once there was forest, hill, river and us. We had villages, homes, land, ourselves. In our fields we grew rice, Kodo, Kutki, Soma... we lived. Then there was game to hunt. It rained, peacock danced, we lived..... We asked the earth's permission, we are setting down takes to build a roof, settling land to grow crops. We worshipped the tree that was the spirit of our village. (*Imaginary Maps*119).

The tribals didn't have the word 'exploitation' in their language. They took from nature as much as it was required to fulfil their needs. But we spoiled their culture in the effort of making them civilized. Shankar further comments:

We were Kings. Became subjects, were subjects, became slaves owed nothing, they made us debtors. Alas, they enslaved and bound us. They named us, as bend slaves, Haroahi, Mahidar, they named us Hali, named as Kamiya, in many tongues. Our land vanished like dust before a storm, our fields, our homes, all disappeared. (*Imaginary Maps* 119)

The land which originally belonged to tribals was taken away from them. The Land Reforms and Land Amendment Act proved to be a failure.

Their exploitation began with the establishment of Company Rule in India. The British Govt. in the then India did not take care of the tribal people. In that colonial rule, the natural resources were exploited highly by the British to fuel the process of industrialisation in India as well as in Britain. To draw raw material for their industrial needs the rulers started exploiting the forests which were the 'shelters' of the *Adivasis* and this is how the xploitation of these people started. As a result of this injustice done to them, the *Adivasis* resisted and revolted against the subjugation of the tribal lands and the culture by the powers that be. But as per the policy of 'Divide and Rule', the colonial rulers divided the minor tribes of the *Adivasis* and tagged them as 'Criminal Tribes' in 1871.

The people from these tribes were taken out of the mainstream *Adivasis*. These were tagged anti social and anti national by the Government for its own selfish gains. After independence, the Government labeled them as 'De-Notified Tribes' in 1952. But there was no change in their stigma. In the post independence India, the Government started many projects of Industrialization with a purpose to develop the undeveloped areas which ultimately resulted in the destruction of forests. To meet the demand of the raw material for the developed countries, the trees were cut and the forests were devastated. The growing population further added to this process of deforestation. Moreover, most of our plans lacked the vision for future. Most of them were implemented hurriedly without any proper homework. Therefore, many environmental issues like soil erosion, global warming scarcity of rains and, above all, the environmental imbalance emerged due to the felling of the trees. In the name of development and with the coming of the industries, the land, which was once under forest cover, has become the private property of the industrialists and the builders. We have replaced a jungle full of trees with the

jungle of concrete. We ignored the dwellings of the poor Adivasis and their love for nature. The Government took the land from the Adivasis in the name of development but ultimately the interests of money-lenders and corporate houses were fulfilled. With a purpose to serve the interests of the rich, the poor were exploited. The change of ecological order necessitated the change of power from the Adivasis to the rich. As a result of this change many of the original inhabitants had to migrate from their land of origin to certain villages and towns of India in search of earning their livelihood. They were marginalised by the mainstream discourse of development and their forceful eviction led to the destruction of their culture and society. They were treated as the 'other' as if they had nothing to do with the destiny of this country. The British Government in India, in a way, changed the relationship of the Adivasis with their land and introduced the Individual Property Rights. According to Historians, the tribals lived a very harmonious life in their community and they were in fine tuning with the environment extracting their bread from it. They consumed only to meet out their basic needs and never exploited the natural resources out of greed. From the very beginning the British established links with the local heavy- weights, landholders, accountants and feudal-lords etc. to consolidate their power. By doing so, they reinforced the semi-feudal agrarian system in India leading to the creation of landlords and tenants. To increase the revenue the Government ignored tribal tradition and envisioned nothing for the welfare of this oldest community. The beautifully describes this change:

The barter economy was ruthlessly replaced by money economy which the tribals could not handle properly. The traditional divisions or distributions of tribal land were now replaced by a rigid landlord tenant relationship. (Jha 87).

In this story, Mahasweta Devi, expresses her serious concern for the tribes of Madhya Pradesh. Pirtha is a tribal region having its own history. The area has its own ecological system which is destroyed by the intrusion of 'daiku' or 'outsiders'. The issues of 'drought' and 'famine' madden the people of Pirtha. The Government agencies fail to solve their problem. Their folk culture and music are appreciated but they are in demand only at the time of Independence Day celebrations. The agricultural methods, as practised by tribals over the ages suited to that particular ecosystem, are replaced by the Government policies. The traditional crops of Kodo, Kutki, Soma and Khajra are substituted by high yielding variety of crops. It has not helped them. The barren land is sprayed with pesticides. The unexpected rain washed away the sprayed pesticide resulting in its gathering in the roots and tubers of Khajra, the staple diet and in the water reservoirs used by tribals.

The poor tribals fell ill when they consumed poisonous Khajra and died of drinking poisonous water. The roots of Khajra sucked up that water and they died eating the fleshly roots of Khajra. On the other hand, the situation is totally different.

Food will rot because of insufficient storage facilities at Food Corporation, but it will still never reach, never does reach Pirtha, Kalahandi or Koraput. Food goes to Africa, to Sri Lanka, promise of building collective crop farms are given at SAARC conferences, let them be given, give everyone everything since you over produce, greatly in food crop production, but why not, at the same time, give to the districts of Kalahandi and to the micro-regions of Pirtha. (*Imaginary Maps* 165)

The people of Pirtha do not want relief material. They are skeptical of govt. schemes. The relief 'tur-ruck' take their children away. They are sold as bonded slaves. The tribals are distraught at the help provided by NGOs. They firmly believe that they should protect their culture from the onslaught of outsiders. The ancestral soul is disturbed as their resting places are dug to build roads. They are also disturbed at the plight of tribals and, therefore, manifest itself to warn the tribals of the impending danger. The Pterodactyl is visible only to the tribals and Puran. Now it is very difficult for Puran to keep it a secret.

Was he in that state that's called a trance in English? But now there is very little time. Some arrangement has to be made, but what exactly? If a naked beggar is asked to hide the Koh-i-noor, where does he conceal the jewel? "Not the Koh-i-noor, but a valuable, rarer, earth-shaking piece of news. (*Imaginary Maps* 142)

When Puran reaches Pirtha, the tribals are in a state of mourning. They are waiting for some miracle to happen. When effects of green revolution are seen in the entire Madhya Pradesh, a part of the state is reeling under intense poverty and despair. Modern India has failed to do justice to its own children. The metal road is not proved to be a connection to progress, rather it serves the interests of exploiters. The money-lenders make their children bonded slaves in return of a 'full stomach'. The contractors make these aboriginals slaves and they "wait like vultures for the moment when starving parents will sell their children in the extremity of despair."

Puran has visited Pirtha for making a report on Pirtha to bring it to world map. He prepares a report but without mentioning anything about Pterodactyl. He faces the dilemma of 'reporting' and 'not reporting'. But he decides to keep it a secret as it disturbs the pristine culture and beauty of the tribals. According to Puran, "Love, excruciating Love" can only save the ancient tribals. Puran cannot afford to be a distant spectator. He realises that in our zeal to civilize the tribals we have destroyed it as "we are destroying the primordial forest, water, living beings, the human." He feels that we haven't loved and respected our tribals. They don't need our ill planned policies. What they require is dignity and self respect.

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