

Mahasweta Devi's *Bitter Soil*: An Ecocritical Perspective

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Abstract

This research article critically examines Mahasweta Devi as an Environmental crusader with special reference to *Bitter Soil*. It is a set of four short stories that is, “Little Ones”, “Seeds”, “Witch”, and “Salt”. These stories focus on the injustice done to the environment and to its environs. The first story “Little Ones” revolves around how the mainstream people exploit the environment and the Aghariya tribes in Lohri. The second story “Seed” set around Kuruda village. It deals with two themes; one is the exploitation of field labourers by not giving them a proper wage and the second is the exploitation by offering uncultivable land to the tribes in the name of ‘Budhanodyamam’. The third story “Witch” delineates the concept of *daini* in the villages of Hesadi and Murhai and the ecological imbalance in those villages. The fourth story in the collection is “Salt”. As the title suggests, the story revolves around the importance of salt.

Keywords- *Exploitation, Little ones, Seed, Witch and Salt*

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Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's *Bitter Soil* is a set of four short stories that is, "Little Ones", "Seeds", "Witch", and "Salt". These stories focus on the injustice done to the environment and to its people. The first story "Little Ones" revolves around how the mainstream people exploit the environment and the Aghariya tribes in Lohri. The village is considered as dessert because nothing grows there: "As if the earth here bears a fire of unbearable heat in her womb" (1). As the land has lost its fertility no crop seems to be cultivated. The soil in Lohri is red as if it is mixed with copper. The surrounding is dusty, warm and the soil remains lifeless. Even the trees in the village have stunted growth. It is a man-made disaster.

The natives of this land owned a myth that they are the iron-miners. They believed that one day they will regain their wealth and would become rich. Several years ago some government officials approached their land in search of iron-ores. At that time, the Aghariyas protested against the officials not to dig the earth because they believed their demon –gods are residing in that place as per the myth. But the officials never cared for their sentiments and blasted the place. They also scattered salt all over the land. The raged Aghariyas killed the officials and hid in the forest. No Aghariyas were found after that incident. The blast made the land uncultivable and that deeply affected the livelihood of the village people.

The government took steps to send relief materials but never cared to check whether they had reached the needy people. The BDO of the village casually claims that the relief materials are usually sold to some high-class people. But the new officer tried his level best by advocating measures to make sure that all the relief materials reach the poor people. Yet being a government official, he was provided with top quality rice, cool water and neat place. The village people got water only through the cracks in the hill which was created during the hill blast.

The officer found that relief materials are being stolen. He thought that the culprits are the children of the village. Only later he came to know that they are all Aghariyas who hid in the forest during the revolt. Out of 150 only 14 of them are surviving. They all have turned into pygmies because of the lack of food for years. They became infertile just like the soil of their land, unable to reproduce. They had stunted growth similar to the trees in that area. They started to steal food in order to survive. The lack of food turned them into pygmies. On one hand, the officer is provided with top quality rice and the mainstream people enjoy meals three times a day. On the other hand, the village people depend totally on relief materials for their survival. People are reduced to Pygmies due to the lack of food. The contrast between the mainstream and the tribal people are brought into significance. The mainstream exploits the marginalised and that leads to even the exploitation of the environment. In the opinion of Mahasweta Devi, "What I wrote in 'Little ones' is correct. Starvation over

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generations can reduce ordinary-sized human beings to pygmies, of course, the starving Aagariyas are savagely angry at a system under which some people eat three meals a day while they are forced to starve” (ix-x).

The second story “Seed” set around Kuruda village. It deals with two themes; one is the exploitation of field labourers by not giving them a proper wage and the second is the exploitation by offering uncultivable land to the tribes in the name of ‘Budhanodyamam’. Both the exploitations are done by the mainstream upper-caste zamindars. The government made it a law that the wealthy landowners are to provide some of their lands to the landless people: “But the landlords did begin to give away little bits of infertile-stony-barren land to provoke their fellow landlords into doing the same” (27). The zamindars used the scheme to discard their uncultivable lands. Though the zamindars owned 2000 bighas of fertile lands with a variety of crops raised, they only gave stony and barren land to the landless people. The government never witnessed it. The zamindars earned good name and get rid of barren lands at the same time.

Lachman is one such zamindar who gave his infertile land to Dulan, a tribe. Dulan received free fertilizers and seeds from the government in the name of farming the land. His family survived by cooking those seeds. Dulan is happy that at least they have seeds to eat not rats that they ate during the famine to survive. Lachman strictly objected Dulan to farm in that land. It is because he killed those who fight against him to increase the wage favouring the tribes and buried in the land that is given to Dulan: “Lachman Singh or Daitri Singh force them to harvest their crops for four annas a day or one meal, at gun point” (32). Though Dulan knows it, he kept quiet in order to survive. But later, when Dulan’s son Dhauta demanded more wage Lachman killed and buried him too.

Lachman set his journey to Kasi. In the meantime, Dulan came to know that plants grow better when supplied with rotten flesh and bones. Dulan determined to change the aloe growing barren land into fertile land with paddy. He farmed and raised paddy crop which was highly nourished. When Lachman is about to kill Dulan for farming in the land, Dulan killed him and buried in the same land. Dulan is satisfied that at least he is able to change those heroes’ corpses into paddy instead of keeping it as worthless stony land.

The third story “Witch” delineates the concept of *daini* in the villages of Hesadi and Murhai and the ecological imbalance in those villages. Women are the one who faced serious problems due to the fear of *daini*. The *daini* concept is initiated by Hanuman Misra who saw *daini* in his dream. Slowly the fear of *daini* became serious in the minds of the people in which the men started to suspect all the women and their own women, irrespective of daughter, wife or mother. An old mother is forced to sleep in the street. She has the habit of blabbering while sleeping. She was suspected as *daini* and stoned to death. Particularly menstruating women suffered a lot due to the fear of *daini*:

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“The kith and kin of menstruating and pregnant women marked their movements with suspicion. Black cows, goats and dogs were stoned for their colour” (90). It was found that the concept was created with a purpose by Hanuman Misra to conceal a crime done by his son. The pahaan’s daughter has been vanished for months ago. Actually, she was made as *daini*. Thakur’s son impregnated her and left her in the forest. In the forest, she ate feathers of birds to survive and was naked. She was mistaken as *daini* and the whole village threw large stones to drive her away. The pahaan, at last, identified that it was her daughter and it was witnessed that she gave birth to a baby. This shows the cruelty done to the womenfolk.

Similarly, the land is also affected as there is no proper rain and the region is struck with famine: “Murhai village suffers from endemic hunger-starvation-famine-drought-bonded- labour-mahajan oppression etc” (71). People made to believe that it is due to the presence of *daini*. But actually, it is the result of ‘collieries’ – the building along with equipment to mine coal in the land surface. The over mining of the coal exploited the land. The impurities that are left unpurified reached the streams and resulted in ecological imbalance: “These people have no niche in man-made economic cycle. Brick kiln-colliery-Bakaro steel-timber industry-railroad-crops, fields- everything has made them redundant-” (117), so it is also a result of man-made disaster as in the short story “Little Ones”.

The fourth story in the collection is “Salt”. As the title suggests the story revolves around the importance of salt. For the tribes in Jhujar belt, the forest is the source of everything. Their lives are depended on hunting animals from the forest and using the crops available. Utaamchand is a greedy merchant and a zamindar. He exploited the tribes in Jhujar belt. Though wagesless work is illegal, he practiced it and people are also unaware that it is illegal. When Purti Munda turned against him he declared that he would kill Purti by salt: “Not by hand, or by bread, *nimak se marega*-I’ll kill you by salt” (126). He refused to sell salt and also ordered other shopkeepers to do the same.

The tribes, at first, never realised the impending danger. Later, it is difficult to cook without salt. They approached the officers and told about Uttamchand’s revenge. But they favoured him and abandoned the tribes. The tribes searched for masters who would pay in terms of salt but the masters used their labour and gave only a little amount of salt. The youth-team realized the importance of salt from the medical representative. To keep balance and remain healthy, our body needs salt and lack of salt would result in deficiency diseases.

Purti sensed the ‘salt-lick’ placed by the forest department for the elephants. The youth-team started to steal salt from salt-lick. Ekoa, the abandoned elephant witnessed the missing of salt and grew furious. One day Purti and his friends stole salt irrespective of the presence of the Ekoa. It went mad and killed all of them. The forest department killed the Ekoa as it is dangerous to let it alive. The

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old tribal people claimed that the death of Ekoa, Purti and his friends are due to Uttamchand's denial of salt. But no case was filed against him and he was not even considered as the reason behind those deaths. During independence struggle, the people of India fought against British, which included Dandi March- the refusal of buying tax imposed salt. Decades have passed after independence; the tribal people died seeking salt, which is still a cheap and affordable product. What is evident is the exploitation of marginalized by the mainstream people. In all the four stories Mahasweta Devi highlights the continuous injustice done to the environment and its people. Thus, she could be very well called as an Environmental Crusader.

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