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An Application of Ecofeminism to The Study of Mahasweta Devi's Short Story 'WITCH'.

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ABSTRACT

The present paper applies the tenets of Ecofeminism to the study of Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Witch'. Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. Degradation of the environment and women tops the list of problems the world faces today. Ecofeminism functions as a tool that draws the attention of the world to crucial environmental issues and to the subjugation of women through the analysis of literature. The study substantiates Mahasweta Devi's basic idea of the exploitation of the tribal women as an extension of the spoliation of land. The reaction to such indiscrimination and domination is represented on the story through the picture of starvation and exploitation with a female character as the center of attraction. The most important is that a voiceless tribal woman, Somri is turned to a 'daini' which means a witch. The so called upper class not only exploits her body but also very cunningly exploits the land and superstition of the villagers.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Degradation, environment.

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper applies the tenets of Ecofeminism to the study of Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Witch'. Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. Degradation of the environment and women tops the list of problems the world faces today. Ecofeminism functions as a tool that draws the attention of the world to crucial environmental issues and to the subjugation of women through the analysis of literature.

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 labeled as "ecofeminist" movements.

The study substantiates Mahasweta Devi's basic idea of the exploitation of the tribal women as an extension of the spoliation of land. The reaction to such indiscriminate and domination is represented on the story through the picture of starvation and exploitation with a female character as the center of attraction. The most important is that a voiceless tribal woman, Somri is turned to a 'daini' which means a witch. The so called higher class not only exploits her body but also very deceitfully exploits the land and fallacy of the villagers.

In this short story 'Witch', Mahasweta Devi paints the picture of malnourishment and mistreatment with a female character as the core of the story. The villagers of Tura are under the terror of 'daini', which was spread on them by Hanuman Misra, the Brahman priest of Tahar.

The village of Kuruda is suffering from drought and famine and the situation is expected to turn worse in the future, "If there is a daini in the vicinity, astonishing things happen, which no one has ever seen, though everyone has heard about them". (Pg-60: Bitter Soil) Efforts are made to track down the daini and in this search the villagers approached Hanuman Misra. He fasted and prostrated himself before the gods. Then he said that gods had sent him an awesome dream, "A terrifying, naked woman uttered the words, 'I am fine,....., she is a daini. This daini has to be found and driven away. If she is wounded, if she bleeds, or if she is burnt to death, a terrible calamity will be visited upon them". (Pg-61)

After hearing this, the superstitious people began to suspect everyone else and also mistrust the behavior of near and dear ones. Suspicion leads to tumult and confusion. Even the Pahan, the chief priest of the village is also not spared by this horror. The news of daini gradually spreads even to the nearby villagers.

The search of the witch is started extensively. Pahan leads his tribe to search for daini: "The Pahan lights a fire, folds his hands and chants the mantra raises his hands to the sky and calls out, Ha Aaba Haramdeo, help me to chase away the daini!" (Pg- 78-79)

After doing so, they begin to run from the village to the forest. Amidst the darkness of the night, they all raise their torches to illuminate the purpose of the search when they reach the bank of river Kuruda: "The black water rushes, foaming, hitting the stones. To the frightened villagers, the rippling water is like the uncoiling of a serpent". (Pg-79)

Finally they stop dead by seeing the witch. Mahasweta Devi describes her image as that of a cannibal: "A large rock. On it stands a naked, very dark young woman. Her mouth is covered with feathers and blood. Sighting them, she raises her hand. She is clutching the ripped-off wing of a bird". (Pg-80)

The villagers start to throw the stones on her as soon as they have seen her. In turn the daini also starts throwing stones at them. In this conflict, the Pahaan is hit on the head and suddenly, "the daini plunges in to the water and quick as lightning, climbs the opposite bank" (Pg- 81) and moves towards Hesadi.

As the daini was chased outside the village, they feel that they are free from the curse of the witch. But still they are scared of the daini with in their hearts. They spent sleepless night for the fear that the daini might come again and haunt their village. The villagers finally believe that they are free from the horror of the

daini. But this faith is shattered when Sanichari, the midwife of the village, goes in search of herbs in the Jilad fields.

The daini picks up a stone and flings it at Sanichari . Sanichari somehow manages to flee from there, but stumbles and falls headlong and loses consciousness. As she doesn't return home, Pahaan and Sharan Mathur, who is a school teacher, step out to search for her. They find Sanichari lying on the sandy bank of the Jilad River in a wounded and aggrieved state. Pahaan takes the responsibility to medicate and cure her.

Pahaan gathers all the villagers and move towards the Jilad fields in search of the daini . They begin to hurl stones as soon as they hear something rocking. "This time they followed the rules of daini-hunting laid down by Hanuman Missa of Tahar. Stone the daini to chase it away. Stone will fix these dainis good and proper". (Pg- 101)

As the battle of stones continued, the daini began to run towards the forest with screaming sound. However, Mathur is doubtful whether she was a daini or not. "Whether the daini's business is true or false, the people's terror, and the anger and violence born of that terror, are undeniably true". (Pg- 103)

Mathur decides to go for hunting in the forest along with some villages boys. Suddenly they find the daini lifts a hand and raises the leg of a dog to her mouth. The daini gives him a chase and while running Mathur comes to know that "it's not a daini. It's a human being".

Over a hundred people entered the forest yelling and screaming. The witch starts and returns to her cave. When the daini does not come out for long, the villagers make fire at the mouth of the cave with the help of bushes and branches. "The swirl of smoke suddenly coils like a snake and slither slowly in to the cave like a python" (Pg-121). Along with the screaming sound, a cry of new born baby is heard from the cave. On hearing this sound, the Pahaan of Tura suddenly realizes that the screams are of his daughter, Somri, who was missing for the past one year. He run in through the flames and is shocked to see the unreal scene: "On the floor of the cave kneels the Pahaan. A naked woman is lying there. Between her legs, still connected by the umbilical cord, is the new born infant". (Pg-122)

Somri is deaf and dumb. She is sent to the house of Hanuman Misra in Tahar to work in the cowshed. Unfortunately she is spoiled by Hanuman's son and thrown out as daini: "Go ask in Tahar. They got their son to rape the dumb, slow witted girl and threw her out. Then they spread the daini alarm, saying don't kill her, just stone her". (Pg-123)

The so called upper class not only exploits Somri's body but also very cunningly exploits the superstition of the villagers. Women are victims of environmental degradation as well as active agents in the regeneration and protection of the environment. The adverse class-gender effects of these processes are reflected in the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems and livelihood strategies on which poor, rural women depend.

On the whole, what is needed is a total change, relating to development, redistribution and institutional structures. Environment and gender issues need to be taken together and the new social movements in India seem to provide the ray of hope for change.

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