

Dispossession and Extractivism in the Life of the Marginalized: An Ecofeminist Reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Witch*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study Mahasweta Devi's short story *Witch* from the collection *Bitter Soil* (1998), in an ecofeminist perspective focusing on the deleterious effects of extractivism, bonded labor system and exploitation of the unprivileged and the environment. Devi describes vividly the outrages, the prejudices of tribal women, the oppression of the tribal community, and the exploitation of the environment in this short story. Tribals were dispossessed and displaced from their indigenous places by the medieval ancient kings and also by the rulers of the British Empire in the pre-independence period; their grievances were further aggravated by the developmental activities of post-colonial India such as land conversion and forest clearing. In the chosen work, Devi constructs an ecological consciousness and promotes the harmony of human lives with nature. The article explains how extractivism as a principle is more profit-oriented and insensitive to the damage done to people and the environment. It also systematically explores how the story *Witch* adds a new dimension to the already existing discourse of ecofeminism, based on several propositions from the West as well as Indian facets, which are even more pluralistic.

Key words

dispossession, displacement, colliery, ecofeminism, extractivism

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali fiction writer (1926–2016) was a social activist, feminist and a crusader for tribal communities. The corpus of her writing runs into more than three hundred fictional narratives. She employs a variety of genres—

short stories, novels, plays, prose, and journalistic writings to capture the contemporary socio-political realities of independent India. She has been recognized for her literary and social contribution to the country, and her works have won accolades from national and international organizations.

Mahasweta Devi's reflections on the issues concerning tribal groups, the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment offer compelling insights. As an activist-writer, she used her writing as a tool for expressing her social concerns about grassroots organization. She was a crusader in fighting for the rights of the tribal communities and one of the founding members of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG). This group fights for the recognition by the authorities of India's indigenous people through their outreach in education, legal intervention, and community activism. Devi (2004) refers to Mahasweta Devi as "Adivasi Mahasweta" for her deep identification with the tribal context, her powerful writing, and her political philosophy.

Devi's acquaintance with the tribal people happened way back in the year 1965 in an impoverished Palamau district in Bihar. She was startled when she first noticed the subjugation of the tribal people by the local tyrants. She witnessed the tribal communities being coerced to accept the ideology of capitalism leading to oppression and marginalization (Yook, 2018, p. 12). Her works expose incessant conspiracy of patriarchal and capitalist ideologists who exploit the deprived. Her writings emphasize the need for a worldwide awareness of exploitation, and the strength needed to combat it.

Though several Indian women writers have added richness and diversity to Indian ecofeminism, Devi's palpable sense of political activism has brought a new dimension to the discourse of Indian ecofeminism. Many researchers have viewed her works from feminist and post-colonial perspectives with subaltern sympathies (e.g., Collu, 1999; Wenzel, 1998) but there are only a limited number of scholarly articles that study Devi as an environmental writer. This article analyses Devi's *Witch* which is a story from the collection *Bitter Soil* (Devi, 1998) through an ecofeminist lens. The location of the story is Palamau, which is a "mirror of India" (p. vii). *Witch* as a short story echoes post-colonial India and depicts the harsh effects of development-sponsored projects on environment and forest-based community people and also their anger at such exploitative development. In this story, the major characters are: Misra (a priest in Shiva Mandir), pahaan (chief priest), Mathur (literate person), and Somri who is the daughter of pahaan. Misra becomes a powerful person by using the illiteracy and the superstitious beliefs of tribal people. Somri who worked in the house of Misra is a mute girl and she was

raped by Misra's son. She was branded as a *daini* to hide the legal consequences of the rape crime. Tribal people were made to believe that famine in the village was due to the *daini* and they chase her. Finally, they came to know that the truth and understood the foul play of Misra.

This paper addresses the precarious position of the indigenous communities in modern India, which is fictionalized in *Witch*. It seeks to explore the interconnections between environmental degradation and its repercussions in the life of the marginalized, particularly tribal women. It is an endeavor to trace the elements of ecofeminism and explore how the chosen work adds a novel dimension to the ecofeminist discourse. The short story *Witch* (Devi, 1998) epitomizes the unscrupulous, reckless and subjugating behavior of hegemonic society, and the ascendancy of the haves over have-nots, the effects of which prove predominantly catastrophic to both human and non-human in general, and to the women in particular. It also portrays the blatant apathy toward nature, women and the deprived, which is interwoven in a socially pragmatic mode. It describes other factors such as caste, gender, patriarchy, environmental degradation and several others that constitute the complex fabric of tribal societies in modern India.

This paper analyzes *Witch*, based on two fundamental premises of ecofeminism. It explores the patriarchal conception of extractivism as the root cause for the exploitation of women and nature; then it analyzes how a helpless woman merely succumbs to the forces of oppression in a Third World country like India through the study of the *daini*, the protagonist.

Contextualizing Ecofeminism in the Indian Milieu

Indian women shared a unique relationship with nature even before ecofeminism was postulated as a theoretical discourse across the globe. Nature has endowed India well and the worship of nature has always been a way of life since time immemorial (Chanda, 2014, p. 34). Nature and women are deified in matrilineal societies, and Indian ancient texts bear testament to this nature-women bond. But the patriarchal society in India during colonial and post-colonial periods marginalized both women and nature for the fulfillment of their needs. The society that once treated women with great respect began to oppress and marginalize women because of the rising hegemonic patriarchal power (Gopinath, Raj, & Jose, 2018, p. 162).

During the pre-colonial period in India, tribes lived in forests and adhered to a "clan-based land tenure system which provides customary rights in land, trees,

forests, etc.” (Kumar, Choudhary, Sarangi, Mishra, & Behera, 2005, p. 15). They had no sense of property but there was communal landholding and they believed that land, forest, and river belonged to everyone (Devi, 1995, p. ii). The villagers were the acknowledged owners of the forest, and the land was held on behalf of the original settlers. The village authorities were involved in taking decisions regarding clearing forest for agriculture, retaining certain village forests for gathering purposes, and in the allotment of agricultural land to individual patrilineages (Guha & Gadgil, 1989, p. 161). The villagers lead their lives in harmony with nature during the pre-colonial period as they had control over land and ecological processes.

India as a developing country in the post-colonial era is grappling with the issue of deforestation, one of the major causes of tribal displacement, social unrest and livelihood crisis. In India, this was a process that invariably involved the forced removal of people with long histories of inhabitation and the corresponding subalternization of nature. It is no surprise that many such developmental activities impoverished the people and led to the displacement of many. The displaced people were usually the underprivileged tribals, and the worst sufferers were the women and children. The post-independence thirst for rapid development plays a major role in the disenfranchisement of tribal people and their involuntary displacement is usually because of large-scale infrastructure development, the building of dams, the digging of mines, and the construction of power generation projects, and recreational facilities.

The current literature on displacement can be categorized into two groups. For the first group, resettlement becomes priority. They view displacement as an inexorable outcome of modernization and recommend that the only policy option is to minimize the adverse impact of displacement (Cernea, 2000; van Wicklin, 2018). The other group views displacement as a crisis in development itself seeing it as an uneven distribution of profit and loss which favors the minority group “while millions of people pay the price without reaping any benefits” (Parasuraman, 1999, p. 39). As a result of displacement, they were forced to leave their habitat and they were not allowed to access the land produce. They also lose their right over their land that provides the context for mundane social customs like collective identities, especially for women, which might offer support during times of coercion and insecurity (Siddiqui, 2014, p. 4). They also lose access to the material resources necessary for their everyday activities and for the conservation of the social community and the natural environment.

Ecofeminism as a practical movement combats the environmental degradation

caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations and global capitalism (Gaard & Murphy, 1998, p. 296). In this regard, a positive step towards this was the Chipko movement in 1973 and a few other movements led by grassroots organizations and the concept of tree-hugging was adopted to curb activities such as deforestation, lumbering, and mining (Gadgil & Guha, 1997, p. 131). The women who endured the brunt of the extra burden caused by ecological depletion catalyzed the movement for the protection and regeneration of the environment. The uneven development policies that were executed after independence have transformed India's agrarian society into an industrial economy, ridden with environmental conflicts. In the contemporary scenario, eminent women activists such as Medha Patkar and, Arundhati Roy (recipient of Booker prize) led the indigenous people against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam as it involved an exodus of aboriginal people. Although, despite their efforts, 60% of the tribals living in the area affected were forced to relocate, the protest gained support not only from the network of women activists but also from Adivasis (indigenous people), filmmakers, journalists, academics and others (Baviskar, 2005, p. 167). Environmental thinkers refer to such displaced tribal communities as "ecological refugees" (Gadgil & Guha, 2013, p. 4). In Indian context, therefore, environmentalism is not the same as western environmental consciousness, where the focus is more on the protection of places like unspoiled hills, forests, or valleys as romantic gateways to escape the evils of modernity. In such cases, the place protected is a far-away place, in both physical and epistemological terms. In contrast, Third World or Indian activism opposes the developmental measures that have no concern for the environment and the survival of the people who depend on its resources such as water and firewood.

Patriarchal Attitude: Impact of Extractivism on Indian Agrarian Culture

Arguments citing the profusion and inexhaustibility of nature's gifts are frequently used to justify extractivism and other ecologically devastating practices. The nexus between states and private interests necessitates massive technology-driven resource exploitation activities leading to the displacement of local inhabitants (Nixon, 2015). "Extractivism" is a term used to denote the plundering and ransacking of nature by a materialistic society. It is an activity where natural resources such as forests, minerals, and soil fertility are extracted on a large scale by depleting the environment. Countries rich in natural resources bear the brunt of the destruction of nature whereas the capitalists enjoy the lion's share of

the benefits (Acosta, 2013, p. 62). As a result of extractivism, political, social and environmental problems become a major concern. Willow (2016, p. 2) proclaims that “unlike extraction, extractivism is both principle and practice”. He makes the following significant assertions: “More than just a way of using the land, extractivism is also a way of thinking. It is a way of being in the world... Extractivism is a political as well as an environmental project, both a social and an ecological problem” (p. 64). In *Witch*, Devi describes the harm done to agrarian systems by various unbridled extractivist activities. The story grapples with a raft of socio-environmental issues like the misuse of agricultural land, encroachment on cultivated land, and the deliberate gradual dismantling of an age-old agrarian culture. Mathur explains the effect of extractivism on villagers who rely on forests for their livelihoods. “These people have no niche in the man-made economic cycle. Brick-kiln-colliery-Bokaro steel-timber industry-railroad-crops, fields—everything has made them redundant” (Devi, 1998, p. 117).

Resource extraction has a long and controversial history. According to White (2013), the history of the modern world is founded on resource extraction and disputes regarding natural resources. The enormous plundering of resources began in south Asian and African nations when these countries were colonized by various European powers. Human resources chiefly in the form of slaves, and natural resources like minerals, ivory, diamonds, and gold, as well as raw materials such as timber were relocated from the resource-rich colonies to the home countries to meet the growing demands of the Industrial Revolution (pp. 60–64). Many post-colonial novels depict the plundering of national resources by the colonial powers. For instance, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* (2001) and Zak Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* (2000) depict the intruding colonizers looting natural wealth. In *Witch*, Devi adds to such accounts with evidences for this type of extractivism in post-colonial India. It draws a picture of the pernicious ramifications of environmental collapse on forests with their indigenous communities and those people’s anguish in the face of such exploitative development.

In the preface to the short story collection *Bitter Soil* (1998), Mahasweta Devi says: “after reading my work the reader should be able to face the truth of facts and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India” (p. 5). The story of *Witch* takes place in the Palamau region, where different cultural patterns ranging from primitivism to industrialization are identified. When famine struck the villages, namely Karuda, Murhai, and Hesadi, the deprived tribals approached Hanuman Misra, a notorious politician, for their livelihoods. He bought coal mines (collieries) “for only 10,000–15,000 each” (Devi, 1998, p. 111). The author says that “the Adivasi

and the local low-caste coolies come as cheap as water” (Devi, 1998, p. 111). Misra and the wealthy used these people from outside the hegemonic power structure for their agenda. The *pabaan* (chief priest) of Hesadi talks to Mathur, and explains how these collieries and brick kilns make Misra a powerful person. The surface collieries are highly beneficial as coal was available from the surface level instead of starting from a noticeable depth and they can employ cheaply the villagers for twelve annas which was a windfall for them. “These surface *collieries* are a special characteristic of the region” (Devi, 1998, p. 111). Misra says, “The local laborers consider 12 annas a day a boon, because in no other line of work can they earn so much money” (Devi, 1998, p. 112). These collieries flourish unchecked under private ownership (Devi, 1998, p. 111).

Agarwal (1997) explains how women of poor households in India are victims of environmental destruction. She traces the history of statization from the colonial era to the present and discusses various resource extractions: large tracts of land for timber cultivation, restriction of local customary rights, and the exploitation of forest by Indian contractors (p. 96). In a similar vein, Devi shows the poor state of the villagers at the hands of the influential men who exploit them and transform them into bonded laborers, debtors and bonded slaves, extracting whatever they owned. In *Witch*, Hanuman Misra, a priest in Shiva Mandir, bought many orchards and arable land by deceiving the villagers and purchased collieries in the neighborhood, thus becoming a dominant force, and coerced the indigenous villagers into become bonded laborers (Devi, 1998, p. 119). In the context of the Indian mining industry, the resource extraction may also take the form of what Martinez-Alier, Demaria, Temper, and Walter (2016) refer to as, “ecological internal colonization”. Ecological factors such as famine and the consequences of reckless excavation in the rich collieries of the village show the intimate correlation between globalized expansion on the one hand and the displacement of native aboriginals and the cultural disappearance of Third World indigenous animals on the other.

The *pabaan* adds that the lands in the hands of the private companies are profitable as they are very close to the brick kilns. By buying these lands Misra can employ many people and earn large amounts of money. He knows that buying these lands will bring the region under his power and make him the richest and most sought after man in the region. The arable lands are grabbed by land-owning Misra for his monetary benefit. The contradictions within the development and progress are vividly represented in the text *Witch*. Shiva (2016) explains,

There is less water, less fertile soil, less genetic wealth as a result of the development process. Since these natural resources are the basis of nature's economy and women's survival economy, their scarcity is impoverishing women and marginalized people in an unprecedented manner. Their new impoverishment lies in the fact that resources which supported their survival were absorbed into the market economy while they were excluded and displaced by it. (p. 223)

As Shiva points out, women in Third World countries, who are engaged in survival strategies in rural and tribal areas, find themselves on the periphery of the nation when forest and cultivated land are destroyed. Despite having spent their entire life working very hard on the land, these women are left in dire straits. The exploitation is further exacerbated by the conspiracy of the privileged and the influential. Rich men like Misra in *Witch* lend their money to these villagers and charge high interest, making it virtually impossible for them to pay off their loans. They have to labor their entire lives to pay off their debts, and employers often mistreat and overburden them, leading even to their deaths. The author of the story *Witch* shows how the police harass the tribals and beat them for no reason and also explains how the government turns a blind eye to this brutality (Devi, 1998, p. 73). This is a point where extractivism is coupled with patriarchy. Hartmann (1979), defines patriarchy as “a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women” (p. 11). In this vein, Misra, an upper-caste man in *Witch*, plans to make a profit and show his dominance over the downtrodden. He is not only wealthy but also powerful because of his influence with police and government officials (Devi, 1998, p. 77). In this connection, Spivak (1995, p. 203, as cited in Yook, 2018, p. 8) states, “the worst product of post-colonialism is the Indian who uses the alibis of development to exploit the tribals and destroy their life-system”. The tribals live at the mercy of these monstrous wealthy people all their lives.

Mathur, a well-educated man in *Witch*, is “extremely honest, hardworking and ambitious” (Devi, 1998, p. 88), writing a doctoral thesis on the Kol Rebellion of 1829–39. It is difficult for him to “meet them as an equal on their mental plane, even though he was a local boy just like them” (Devi, 1998, p. 89). Though he was educated, he could not free himself from the caste system, and being a caste Hindu, he considered himself above the Adivasi. This is a clear indication of how the caste system ruled over the literate and the illiterate. As he wanders from

village to village in pursuit of materials, he becomes well aware of the social dynamics of the villagers. The plight of the villagers creates in him a deep anxiety, and he thinks that there is no place for these people in the man-made economic cycle.

Nature is their only hope. If it rains, crops grow, the forest flourishes, roots, and tubers are available, and there are fish in the river. Nature's breasts are dry with no rain. So they hold the *daini* responsible and are angry. The people of Bharat don't want them. If nature, too, turns away, they will be wiped out. (Devi, 1998, p. 118)

Being abandoned, the tribal people find a sense of belonging and oneness with nature. In society, women and nature are forced to the lowest ranks of the hierarchy as the needs of the higher ranks are met at the cost of their freedom. They are forced to hand over their land and submit to the ruthless and wily nature of non-aboriginal landlords who want to show their hegemony. Through the character Misra, Devi offers penetrating insights into the ecological and economic details of how these tribals are marginalized, desensitized, stripped of human rights, and are treated as disposable commodities for the benefit of patriarchal society. Here, the whole of the community turns out to be the first-hand victim of extractivism.

Ecofeminist Concerns: Exploitation of Women and Nature

In the short story *Witch*, nature is denigrated and women are sexually exploited by the wily nature of the masculine tyrants. The ecofeminist perspective of the short story shows that Misra, the priest of Shiva Mandir, not only snatches the land from the villagers to quench his avaricious thirst but also brands the innocent woman Somri as a *daini* to cover his son's vicious act. It is evident that powerful men exploit both women and the land to demonstrate their powers by using illiteracy and superstitious beliefs as a tool to deceive the villagers. As famine is rampant, the people are terrified of *daini*, a bloodthirsty witch, hunting to snatch the sinful souls. The credulous villagers approach Misra to find the source of misfortune. He prostrates himself before the deity and says that it had sent him an awe-inspiring dream:

A terrifying naked woman uttered the words, "I am famine", before floating away on a blood-soaked cloud. According to the panjika, she

is a *daini*. This *daini* is 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. (Devi, 1998, p. 59)

Having recounted this, he unleashes the fear in the mind of the villagers. People begin to shiver in unknown terror. Somri, a mute girl, had been sent to work in the house of Misra, where she was sexually assaulted by his son. Pahaan says, “A year ago, for the last five months, there’s been no news of her”, and Misra says “she’s gone away, who knows where?” (Devi, 1998, p. 120). As Somri’s pregnancy becomes apparent, the rumor of the *daini* spreads among the villagers. The villagers watch over the women in their families, to see if they cast their shadows. They are not afraid to abandon or kill their women and children if they show any sign of being cursed by *daini*. “She casts an evil eye from afar, or uses her evil magic to curdle milk, kill cows and goats, destroy crops, bring drought, cause famine, take the lives of little children, lure menstruating women into her coils, and enter the wombs of pregnant women” (Devi, 1998, p. 104).

The arduous quest of intrepid villagers to hunt the *daini* is spearheaded by *pahaan*. “Everyone, young, aging and old, lights his torch at this fire. Stones tucked into the folds at their waists. Then the *pahaan*.....calls out ‘Ha Aaba Harmdeo, help me chase away the *daini*!’” (Devi, 1998, p. 77). “Witch-hunting” is prevalent among tribal communities in post-colonial India and it claims many innocent lives. Kislaya (2019) reports that witch-hunting is a social malady and is rooted in the patriarchy, and the bigger agenda behind this social evil is land grabbing and sexual exploitation. In 2001, the Indian government passed a Dayan Pratha (prevention of witch practices) Act to end the superstition and protect women from this inhuman practice, but it remains ineffective. According to a National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) report, it is estimated that as many as 2,290 women were branded as “witches” and killed in India during the period 2001–2014. Chakraborty (2010) mentions that its is an inherent quality of powerful men to punish or settle scores with whom they have family rivalries (p. 123). Washington post reports despite many awareness campaign the under developed states like Bihar and Jharkhand still practice witch-hunting and women are branded as witches on an average of five per month. The indifference to the destruction of the environment is a close analogy to the eternal torment that women suffer (Mies & Shiva, 1993). In fact, Misra introduced a fictitious character *daini* in *Witch* and used *it* as camouflage for his son’s vicious act. To protect his son against the legal consequences of molesting Somri, he started the *daini* story (Devi, 1998, p. 98). Misra exploited the villag-

ers by making use of their superstitious beliefs to achieve his agenda.

Somri raped by Misra's son, is pregnant and has been abandoned. "She is dumb! She can't speak. Her body grew, but not her!" (Devi, 1998, p. 122). Her disability portrays the plight of voiceless women in the tribal community, and their voices are silenced by the patriarchal norms. She is a victim of patriarchal oppression. Her screams of '*Anbanbanb*' (p. 79) were not the hunting screams of a witch but a cry for help. Once banished to the forest, she had resorted to eating raw flesh to satisfy her hunger. The portrayal of Somri in the story reduces her to the state of an animal. Devi corroborates the idea that the victim of patriarchal oppression cannot remain human; oppression dehumanizes human beings. Through the *daini*, Devi symbolically shows how the patriarchal society turns land (nature) and women into a commodity to be conquered, plundered and mined by antagonistic masculine powers. Somri is not the sole victim of such violence; there are thousands of tribal women who are thus tortured in the name of superstition. It must be noted here that marginalization through superstition exists because of the isolation of the tribals from mainstream life.

During the course of the witch-hunting, the *daini* turns her face. She is "a distended grotesque figure". Mathur realizes that it is not a *daini* but a human being (Devi, 1998, p. 115). Hundreds of villagers gather in front of the cave. "The mood is vengeful violence" (Devi, 1998, p. 117). They thought that the heat would force the *daini* out:

With the ordered precision of soldiers, these bloodthirsty people pile the bushes and branches at the mouth of the cave. Someone from the Dhai village fetches kerosene, pours it on. The fire grows. The smoke fills the cave. Green branches snap loudly in the flames... (Devi, 1998, p. 118)

Devi exposes the bestial treatment and the condition of the tribes in their relations with their exploiter. "*Anb-anb-anb-anb-anb!* 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 *pabaan* realizes that the screams are not of a *daini* but of his daughter Somri. He gets into the blaze to see an unbelievable scene: "on the floor of the cave kneels *pabaan*. A woman is lying bare. Between her legs still connected by the umbilical cord, is the newborn infant" (Devi, 1998, p. 120). The sight of Somri still connected by the umbilical cord to her infant child, is a clear picture of how men have failed to pro-

tect their women. As the mob comprehends the scene, their fear of the *daini* dissipates, the villagers attend to Somri and her newborn and a “profound peace” permeates the forest. The villagers understand that it is not an unusual drought that has stricken the village but only a tyrant’s cloud of terror that made them “think otherwise”. The female tribals are doubly denigrated and exploited, not only by gender discrimination but also by capitalist and patriarchal Indian society. As women are “traditionally regarded as a field” and men “as the seed”, these gender relations result in and fortify “oppressive bondage for women” by men (Nubile, 2003, p. 23). In the short story, just as land is plowed and sown, the *daini*’s body was ravaged by the male tyrant.

Somri branded as a *daini*, the central character of *Witch*, strongly felt much safer in the forest. “The *daini* began to run towards the forest” (Devi, 1998, p. 102). She personifies nature as an empathetic protector and refuge in distress. She hid in the jungles to escape from the judgmental, stereotypical notions of the society. The *daini* found nature a comforting companion in whose presence she could forget the hierarchy prevalent in the society and all the sorrows of victimization. The society drove her insanity, but nature gave her a sense of protection and comfort. The statement by Judith Plant (1989) regarding the link between the exploitation of women and the ecological crisis is of special relevance in this context: “The rape of the earth, in all its forms, becomes a metaphor for woman in all its many guises” (p. 238). Ecofeminism is based on the social critique that the domination of women and nature by patriarchal ideology and western model of development are parallel with each other. Therefore, the effects of oppression of women and the ecological devastation are the symptoms of the same illness (Sydee & Beder, 2001, p. 281).

The exploitation of nature in the short story *Witch* is symbolic of the exploitation of women in the villages. Misra bought acres of land for a price cheaper than it should have been; he destroyed nature and exploited its resources. Similarly, Somri’s body was exploited; she was chased away from her house and a false story was fabricated to portray her as a *daini*. Somri shut herself away from everyone, while nature refused to produce rain, which resulted in famine. Therefore, the story very much engages with the life experience of the illiterate village community oppressed by men belonging to upper strata of society known for material concerns alone. Devi’s narrative in *Witch* reflects the victimization of the lowest stratum of society by the avaricious capitalist attitude of men, which is contemporaneous with the annihilation of the tribal habitats.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's short story *Witch* allows for a critique of the major ecofeminist conceptual discourse, which surfaces in the proposition of Ruether (1975, p. 195), "patriarchal self-deception about the origin of consciousness ends logically in the destruction of the earth". Although she herself refrains from being an ecofeminist, a critical analysis of the story reveals that she is in favor of greater gender inclusiveness and the association of women with nature. Her narratives do not construct the tribal women of India as a homogenous category but instead draws the attention of the readers to several other factors that constitute the complex fabric of tribal societies in modern India. Her writing highlights the sufferings of tribal women and centralizes the voices of the oppressed women. The mental agony of Somri in *Witch* has been described vividly, and the materialistic patriarchic attitude of the society has been exposed by the writer. She believes that the existence of mankind is possible only when human beings acknowledge and revere Mother Nature rather than usurp it for personal profit. Her fiction unveils her concern about the alarming imbalance between man and nature due to globalization, privatization and the capitalistic policies of different governments. It is obvious that modern developmentalism can never comprehend the indefinable distinctive interrelation of the tribal aboriginals and the forests. Devi is ironically critical of modern technology-oriented progresses. As Singh points out, Devi's writing has a double focus. "In her, we find the concrete alternative to resist and destroy not only the injustice of gender politics but also the incursion upon tribal land and forest by feudalism, colonialism and global capitalism" (Singh, 2011, p. 9). She captures the multi-tiered levels of bio-degradation that harm humans and the radical change that it brings about in the soil, water, and air. By forging together, the twin-discourses of creativity and an activist outlook, Mahasweta Devi stands out as a conscious author who points out the possibilities of embracing the ecofeminist insight into the neglected lives of the marginalized.

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