

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF THE OPPRESSED CHARACTERS ON THE BOOK OF THE HUNTER

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Abstract

The depiction of the know-how of life is made through a picture, a song and a story as been significant to human beings as the struggle for their physical survival on earth. Every human being at all times has felt the need to articulate their responses to their scrupulous life conditions that endured the historical, cultural and literary legacy of our past. People of all times have also always engaged with this inheritance, comparing it with their own contemporary incidents, connecting and redefining, thus leaving their own creations for future to hold with.

Keywords: depiction, scrupulous, legacy, inheritance,

The Book of The hunter (2002) was first published in Bengali as *Byadkhanda* in 1994 and translated into English by Mandira and Sagaree Sengupta is a fascinating conglomeration with its intermingling tresses. The novel outlines the roots of the Lodha Shabars, recognize them as a community that is closely connected with nature and documents their anguish.

During the colonial rule in 1871, the Lodhas were branded as criminals, a stigma that is still attached to them especially to those in Medinipur. However, efforts are being taken in figuring the image of the Lodha tribe to re-establish their self-esteem. In the Preface to this novel, Mahasweta Devi declares:

In this novel, I undertook for the first time to seek out the tribal identity of the Shabars. Whatever I have written about *Byadh* (hunter) or Shabar life, every detail will certainly be corroborated by the Shabars themselves-the day they are no longer driven from place to place, cruelly oppressed, and insulted.... Such is my goal, but I do not know whether I will accomplish it. This is, however a beginning. The encroachment of towns and non- adivasis upon their territory, adivasis abandoning their lands and going away, the heartless destruction of forests, the search of the forest children for a forest home, and the profound ignorance of mainstream people about adivasi society-these are all truths about our own time (Preface *The Book of the Hunter* xi).

Mahasweta Devi has great consideration for these tribes and their rehabilitation in history that has lost their oral lore.

Mahasweta regards this as probably one of the first instances where tribal life has been represented by a mainstream author with insight and sympathy. By representing the Shabars in

his epic, Mukundaram has “somewhat lightened the burden of mainstream society’s sins”, feels Mahasweta Devi. (Preface *The Book of the Hunter* xi)

As for Mukundaram Chakrabarti, Mahasweta Devi too, acquired knowledge and one’s own direct life experiences form the twin spouts of the fountain head of creativity. In the introduction to the novel she narrates how she inscribed *The Book of the Hunter* by interweaving three sources-Mukundaram’s epic, her own first-hand experience from her activist work with the Shabar tribes and the Shabars’ own writings about themselves in her journal *Bortika*. This classic novel provides evidence to Mahasweta Devi’s fiction, both in terms of narrative technique as well as thematic content.

The novel skillfully entwines the stories of Mukundaram’s life with that of the Shabars, as they co-existed in a village society of rural Bengal in the sixteenth century. Mahasweta Devi portrays numerous elements, from reality, fiction, folklore and history, into its complexity. The novel begins with a fictionalized account of how the medieval Brahmin Mukundaram Chakrabarti, farmer, householder and poet, who is obliged by circumstances leaves behind his land of origin Daminya and, with intricacy, make his way across the unknown landscape, to the land of Ararha longing for a better life.

In the new land after securing status, riches and peace an inner voice that is closer to his mother’s instigates him to expel his creativity. But, for quite some time he is hesitant about the story that he has to narrate. Mukundaram gets inspired by Abhayachandi the goddess of the Shabars, the tribal who live in the forest closer to Ararha. In their new adopted home, it is Abhayachandi, the goddess of the forest and of the Shabars, the forest-dwelling tribal. Abhayachandi turns out to be the muse of his epic *Abhayamangal*.

Mahasweta Devi chooses Mukundaram’s epic as a base to her novel as it is totally based on the life of the tribal. She also invokes the great traditions of writing that prevails in India figuring the tribal subject. Mukundaram’s *Abhayamangal* belongs to the genre of the “mangalakavya”, which were narratives of the “panchali” tradition and held pride of place in the medieval literature of Bengal. Literary historians note that the “mangalakavyas” were probably attempts at ‘elevating’ or incorporate indigenous deities into the Hindu pantheon. Nevertheless, their importance lies in their narrative features of the socio-cultural and religious practices of the oppressed, subaltern social groups like the peasants, lower classes and castes, the tribal, women, other religious groups.

Mahasweta Devi spins her narrative around the actual creation of his epic: how the poet comes to a new place, and gets to know the Shabars through their close interaction with his wife and other members of his community, with whom they trade medicines and other forest produce. He learns of their myths relating to their origin and their occupation as hunters.... She creates her tale using Mukundaram’s epic, her own first – hand association with the Shabar community and the writings of the Shabars themselves in the contemporary times (Nair: “Subversion and Resistance: The Uses of Myth in Mahaweta Devi’s *The Hunt* and *The Book of the Hunter*” 117).

And the young tribal couple, Kalya and Phuli — who are full of a raw, intense and often painful love for each other — become his protagonists in *Byadhkhanda* (*The Book of the Hunter*), the forest-dwellers’ section of the epic that Mukundaram at last sits down to compose.

Mukunda experiences the new areas of village life that he hadn’t come across in his world of learning and scholarship. He gradually overcomes his prejudices and preoccupied notions about the tribal and realizes that their right to be seen as “civilized” human beings. Mukundaram’s artistic heart continues to long for creative expression after dedicating long years of farming.

Mukunda's discussion with Kalya gives him the insights into their diverse tribal identity, and he learns their immense cultural heritage through their verbal experience of myth and legend pass on to him by Tejota. He personally observes the dreadful conditions and humiliation encountered by the Shabars with the dominant groups in the village society, and the tragic impact of the loss of their traditional forest lands and their cultural traditions.

As Mukunda lived all through his life with his own tradition he could not ignore the adamant voice. The novel ends with Mukunda documenting the story of the Shabars wisdom and mythology that has been imparted to him by Tejota. Ironically, Tejota recognizes Mukunda the Brahmin scholar is the one who is fit to know the secret knowledge of the tribe and not her own son Kalya. Therefore the story of the tribal is entwined in the larger traditions that existed in that society. As it is a piece of the epic poem *Abhayamangal*, the story of the Shabars is sealed in the grand narrative tradition by, keeping alive the possibility of subversion.

They are perceived as opposed narratives that challenge the privileged social, religious and narrative structures all the way through the preference of the deity worshipped, the characters, the story, the literary and aesthetic techniques used and the implied audience. Critics mentioned that Bengal's tradition had a dissent literature right from pre-medieval times to the present times. The genres of socially committed realistic narratives that have had an almost unbroken run in Bengali literature are also a reflection of this trend.

Although Mahasweta departs radically from conventional Bengali literature in terms of style and subject, her writing are similar to many of the non-canonical descriptive practices, especially the oral narratives of the tribal and folk streams, in her efforts to symbolize subaltern life, history and culture. The structure of this novel also provides the key to Mahasweta's narrative style. She places the narrative of the tribal amidst the myriad narratives that formulate the story of Indian civilization. As Radha Chakravathy observes, there is "literariness" to her fictional writing that points to her sharp awareness of the discursive practices that govern social structures. (*Introduction In the Name of the Mother ix*)

The protagonist of the novel, Mukunda learns about the Shabar he does not: "believe that a forest-dwelling Shabar could know much about anything. In his arrogance, stemming from the prolonged study of numerous Sanskrit texts, he believed that knowledge only came from the formal cultivation of learning. He was not conscious that he possessed this arrogance (*The Book of the Hunter 55*).

Mukunda later realizes that the social world in Ararah 'was the same as it had been in Daminya' (*The Book of the Hunter 55*). He also declares, "That's not what we call knowledge, Kalachand," (*The Book of the Hunter 55*). The villager replies, "Well, you ought to know. Around here we respect Tejota a great deal" (*The Book of the Hunter 55*). By perpetuating Tejota's wisdom and making her as the central character that is similar to Mukunda, Mahasweta allocates a room for the erased knowledge and culture of the tribal to be expressed along with the prevailing informative systems. Though she presents the experiential facts of the material realities of the tribal life, she shows them engaging with the discursive structures of society including their own cultural traditions, both of which restrict their existence.

According to Beniwal and Vandana Mahasweta challenges the "...ideological, economic and political edifice which silences the voice of the subaltern, invisibilizes them and declares their narratives to be unworthy of record and transmission" ("Subaltern Historiography and Literary Aesthetics" *The Quest 31*). In *The Book of The Hunter* Mahasweta tries to recover tribal history from its silent and marginalized, presence in the discourses of Indian history and

literature. However, this is apart from her engagements with the various references made to tribes in texts such as the epics, the Puranas, Ithihasas and so on.

In an interview with Gayatri Spivak, Mahasweta speaks of India's tribal history as a continuum that runs parallel to the "official" discourse of Indian history, "Tribal history is not seen as continuity in Indian historiography... Yet it is still continuing, the tribal are still being evicted from their land..." (Mahasweta Devi "Telling History" Ix-xxiii) She compares tribal history to a flowing river with no purpose. As it is an unwritten history which has been forgotten and unobserved.

Mahasweta uses the historical genre in *The Book of the Hunter* that has led to a significant critical interest and debate in literature. The main factor in the novel is the contextualization of the historical moment, which provides the scope for both spatial as well as temporal.

In *The Book of the Hunter*, the Shabar couple Kalya and Phuli is named after their mythical ancestors, and they themselves become part of the myth. The novel is all about the fictionalized account of how Kalya and Phuli, the young tribal couple named so after their illustrious ancestors happily live in the lap of the forest as long as they are unaffected by civilization. However they play out their roles in the tragic contemporary history of their tribe.

Mahasweta's narratives are thus coalescing with myth and history as she articulates both the past and the contemporary reality of the tribal characters. All her fictional works deal with the tribal subject. Although she paints a wide canvas, she never loses view of the definite time and the local context. Each of her works deals with the issues of specific tribes, seeking to recreate a specific socio-historic milieu through a skillful inter-weaving of history, fiction and folklore, bringing alive a particular time and space.

In *The Book of the Hunter*, Kalya's poignant endeavor to recuperate his racial and cultural identity and pride through a re-enactment of the ancestral myth of the hunt ends in tragedy. As their old traditions and ways of life undergo the inevitable changes, they are forced to rewrite and re-enact their own traditions.

Thus Mahasweta's deliberately represents the inclusion of tribal cultural expression in her narratives as it restores the living function of tribal society and also attains the dual purpose of political and cultural resistance of the tribal people.

The Shabar origin myth is narrated to the Brahmin Mukundaram by the Shabar Community head, Tejota, who possesses the secret knowledge of the tribe that has been passed on to her by her father, Danko Shabir. From the narration of the myth the readers come to know about the past life of Shabars, how their goddesses had blessed them with seven pots of everlasting riches and made them the rulers. But the credulous children of Nature are cheated by the so called civilized people and as a result are forced to live in poverty until "The Akhetiya who encounters the golden monitor lizard will emerge from the forest as a king wearing a golden crown" (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 72). Thus Shabar who succeeds in killing a golden monitor lizard and after which their lost glory could be restored.

In the novel Mahasweta Devi juxtaposes the Brahmin life that stands for civilization/urbanization with that of the life of the tribal, a life lead in close proximity with nature.

In reality the Shabars are one of the most primitive tribes who are located in the districts of Saingbhum, Ranchi and Hazaribagh. Presently they are on the verge of extinction. In the novel Mahasweta Devi, talks of them as people who live beyond the town of Ararha at the edge of a jungle called Chandir Bon. She underlines that they are not too particular about money nor

do they have enough with them. In fact, they never realized that they were poor. They were content and happy with whatever they received from Mother Nature.

The Shabar men roam “...around, bamboo staff, axe or spear in hand, killing birds and animals for a living – ...” (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 101), while the women go to market to ‘... sell meat, feathers, skins, wood, honey, incense, fruits, *kul*, roots and bark. They buy nothing except for rice, cloth, salt, pepper and oil. They’re always happy. They have so many festivals and holidays – both men and women dance and play on little drums. They mind their own businesses and are perfectly content. The men and women both toil hard. To this day, Phuli’s mother and aunts can chop wood with ease and skin deer too. They have a fine life.’ (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 49)

In general, the tribal have always enjoyed a close bond with nature. The tribal share a deep intimacy with their forest habitats. Similarly the Shabars also maintained a close Kinship with forest, their environment. Their life in the bosom of the forest is a blessed one. They are forever well guarded by their deity, Abhyachandi, who also caters to all their needs.

The Shabars believe that their Goddess blesses them with fearlessness. Talking about the greatness of their deity Kalya, the hunter tells the Brahmin, ““ And to everyone and everything! The Forest, the animals, the birds, and the Shabars – she gives them all courage and keeps them under her wing...” (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 44). Abhaya is their reference to the forest in which they live. They consider the forest itself to be their mother. The Shabars are inseparable from the forest. They are fully aware of the fact that “A Shabar is where the jungle is” (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 86).

Their propinquity with nature is so deep that they know in and out of Mother Earth. In the novel, Tejota, the old tribal woman’s knowledge about her environment is quite astonishing. The wisdom that Mukundaram, the Brahmin has gained from various books, scholars and experience is too little before Tejota’s wisdom. Tejota, Kalya’s mother has been bestowed with the wisdom by her father Danko Shabar who knew everything about nature. As Kalya’s father, Megha went against the hunting laws of the community by killing a doe, he was not eligible to gain the knowledge and so Danko passed it on to Tejota who in turn would hand it over to her son Kalya if he proves befitting to receive it. Like her father Tejota also knows everything about the forest in which they live.

‘... There’s nothing that old woman doesn’t know. The time the king’s elephant went mad, she took one look and said, ‘This is not a job for you.’ Kalya and his gang captured the elephant’s net. A nail from the gate of the elephant – shed had got stuck in the sole of its foot. Tejota pulled it out and put medicine bark on it ... she’s really a wise old woman!’ (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 46)

The Shabars have a great respect for her. She is in the knowhow of their history, of the myths related to their origin, of their goddess, Abhayachandi, about their community laws, of the different seasons and what is best for each of the plants, shrubs and trees that engulf them. She is fully aware of the medicinal herbs that grow in the forest and their natural cure. ““ ... She can point out medicine herbs to the king’s doctor...” (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 47).

Despite being kind to the king, the Shabars do not treat the king of Ararha as their king and so do not go to him for justice. But, the Shabars fight for the king of Ararha when there is an enemy attack nor do they never work in the army for pay. In general they do not recognize kings anywhere. They also do not have a high regard for a Brahman because they believe that the trust that they placed on the Brahmin made them lose their glory.

These Shabars have rules of their own. They never go against it. Punishments are inflicted on all those who violate the community laws. When Megha knowingly or unknowingly kills a pregnant deer, there is no forgiveness for him. “A meeting had been called, a trial held. Megha had lost his right to become chief through his offence. Danko had said to him you live in Abhaya’s jungle, and she is the creator, nurturer and protector of all living beings on land and water. To disobey her law is the greatest of sins!’ (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 84) For ages they have been worshipping goddess Abhayachandi whom they revered for all that she is. The Shabars have great regard for women. Shabar men never received dowry to marry a woman. Instead, they paid streedhan in the form of deer, elephant hides, tiger skins, tiger claws, elephant tusks and others so that the bride’s father can sell it in the market and buy all that is needed for a community feast.

Above all it is to be noted that women are honoured and are considered to be significant members of their tribe as is Tejota. Women are allowed to remarry on the death of their husband or on their desertion.

The tribal men solely rely on hunting, on what their Mother Earth provides. They are satisfied with “...Whatever comes out of the jungle, they’ll eat it scalded or roasted. They won’t work on any schedule, they won’t farm, and they’ll retort, why plough when there’s a forest” (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 65). But, hunting is not as easy as it appears to be. There are laws even for hunting. Danko cautions Kalya and reminds him of their hunting law when they go out to hunt the huge old tusker. Even Kalya goes against the hunting laws and so is killed by the elephant. The customs, traditions and the community codes of these Shabars make them superior to the civilized people and their practices.

Their intimacy with nature is enviable but it is pathetic to observe that they too confront too many challenges to sustain their environment. In the novel Mahasweta Devi, throws light on various challenges and their impact on the tribal, the children of nature. Of them the first is the depletion of natural resources. The Shabars’ hunting expedition is need – based contrary to the want – driven hunt of the civilized. In the novel, the traders approach Kalya for hundred skins of male deer for a particular religious ceremony. Kalya knows well that the deal would fetch him more money. But, he does not yield to the temptation by going against the laws of his community that bans hunting of the deer during the mating season and does not want to incur the curse of Abhaya. He understands that they are all Abhaya’s creatures and that he should not destroy them for his greed.

Still, the civilized people continue to engage themselves in the depletion of natural resources, by felling trees. They hardly realize that deforestation is one of the greatest threats to environment and that it would rob Shabars of their environment. But, the children of the forest are sensitive to changes. They sense that the forest is receding and that the town of Ararha is advancing and that they have to go in search of some virgin forest. It does not cease with that. Even their simple way of living is influenced by the city – dwellers.

Phuli who is described to be wearing all natural accessories palm – frond earrings and wooden bangles seems to be craving for brass anklets once she mingles too much with the women of the town. Kalya, instantaneously warns her saying, “No. An akhetiya’s wife never wears brass or bronze. Doesn’t Ma warn us to stay away from metal things?” (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 96) The influence of the town dwellers does not stop with Phuli alone. In the novel, Mahasweta Devi ruefully remarks as,

No, the town and its people would spread out and the dwellers at the edge would set their eyes on the others’ houses, yards, ways of living and

customs. The younger generation would be influenced. Sana's family had learned to save. This year their roof was not made of leaves, but of hay. It was quite an event to see Shabars suddenly smoothing mud over their house walls and painting pictures on them! Their ways were quite different from the other Shabars. Sana's husband did not thrash her, and Sana had oil in her hair and rice in store.

There was no stopping the times from changing! A Shabar understood that the more others encroached, the more his existence would be threatened. Then, that was it. He'd pick up camp, sticks and all, and calling 'Ma, Ma!' go off into the shelter of some virgin forest (Mahasweta: *The Book of the Hunter* 106).

This is not the plight of Shabars alone. Many other tribal in India too face similar challenges. But, how do they sustain their environment is worth mulling over. In *The Book of the Hunter*, Danko Shabar cares for the forest and its resources. He is continually anxious about the dwindling Shabar tribe that value forests. So, his main concern at the outset is to increase the number of the Shabars by giving birth to new generations of Shabars.

The forests in which the Shabars live happily and majestically are vanishing. Upholding the tribal beliefs, Mahasweta Devi discloses how Danko hankers for a medicinal herb that would increase his longevity so that he can live longer and give birth to many children and create a Shabar settlement in some Abhaya's jungle. Moreover Mahasweta Devi also suggests afforestation as one of the strategies to sustain the environment through Danko who is found growing medicinal herbs.

But how far can one follow Danko Shabar's footsteps in reality are to be considered. A close scrutiny of *The Book of the Hunter* exposes that Mahasweta Devi has some message for the readers. Both the forest and the sylvan children of the forest who are affected due to the rampant growth of urbanization must be safeguarded. Of course the novel tells the stories of human beings in the forest and in the towns and also of their condition but it certainly touches the hearts of the readers. One tends to empathize with the tribal and feel for them when they leave behind the Chandir Bon and go out in search of a new forest. The novel not just changes the attitudes of the people but it also changes the readers' hearts. It is these people with the changed heart who can sustain their environment and also allow the sylvan children to live peacefully in their pristine environment. Should not one plant atleast a tree and learn to imbibe the sense of oneness that the tribal share with the forest and thus keep going a green environment for posterity?

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