

RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL : AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROW



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Delegation to the 2nd **International Congress on Human Rights & Duties**
(Regd: **04ICHRD2**)

Abstract:

Ecofeminism which is introduced in the 1970s deals with the connection between the subjugated status of women, nature and other oppressed classes. As a movement ecofeminism rejecting previously held dominant ideologies of patriarchal as well as colonial domination holds the belief that the oppression of women and the domination over the other inferior sections of the society by men carry the link to the degradation of environment. Locating resistance and survival of the subaltern in her novel *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* Mahasweta Devi draws out the unspoken and unwritten history of the subaltern, the history of their survival that is wrapped by the importance of the elite class. Searching history through her visiting to the tribal villages she writes the tragedy of their survival, their connection to nature, their culture of archery and their resistance against their exploiters. What I intend to highlight here is the survival and solidarity of the subaltern from an ecofeminist viewpoint in postcolonial context where history, nature, culture and identity being dominated by the elite class seek the way out from these dilemmas through their innate connection to their culture of archery. Thus challenging dominant strategies of the elite class, Mahasweta Devi empowers the subaltern to resist by their strategies of survival in postcolonial context.

Keywords: *Chotti Munda and His Arrow, Ecofeminism, Mahasweta Devi, Postcolonial, Subaltern, Survival, Resistance.*

Chotti Munda, as per Gayatri Chakravoty Spivak, repeatedly dramatizes subaltern solidarity : Munda, Oraon, and the Hindu outcastes must work together. Today such a solidarity has a name : dalit. The seduction of an identitarianism in the name of the dalit can learn a lesson here. With a degree of regret, Chotti accepts that cultural identity must be--to take an altogether inappropriate metaphor that is easy for the reader to understand--museumized (*Chotti Munda* 290).

While Spivak's "Can the subaltern speak?" strongly declares the muteness of the

subaltern Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* holds the voices of the subalterns, the language of their culture of archery. Mahasweta Devi, along with the records of the colonial and postcolonial history, draws out the voices of the Mundas who are the victims of the criminalization of politics, merciless torment and oppression. She says, "What Chotti Munda or my other stories and books depict is a continuing struggle" (*Chotti Munda* ix). While saving the tribal culture and traditions from being disappeared, Mahasweta Devi emphasizes a series of dilemmas, responsible to affect the subaltern world and enough to give voice to



the subalterns. On one hand, the novel depicts the tyrannical supremacy of the landowners, moneylenders and the contractors who benefit from the support of the government and clutch the Mundas and the untouchables through everlasting bondage, on the other hand, it represents the inequality, poverty, deprivation and humiliation of the tribal communities. What this article intends to focus is to analyse Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* from the view point of Ecofeminism. As a theory it is still at a budding stage and needs more examination for its wide recognition. The term ecofeminism is coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le féminisme ou la Mort* in 1974. It deals with a link between feminism and ecology. It approaches a connection between the subjugated status of women, nature and other oppressed classes. She shows how male dominated society and its masculine power are responsible for the oppression of women and exploitation of nature. On one hand, ecofeminism works as a theory and on the other hand, it works as both movement and philosophy. As a theory it connects all kinds of social domination along with the domination over women and exploitation of nature.

For Ynestra King, "Ecofeminism's challenge of social domination extends beyond sex to social domination of all kinds, because the domination of sex, race, and class and the domination of nature are mutually reinforcing. (quoted in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* 21).

While as a movement ecofeminism rejects previously held dominant ideologies like patriarchal and colonial domination to establish sustainable society, as a philosophy it erases all forms of social injustice by erasing the dualistic notions (man/woman, nature /culture etc.) to liberate all the subordinated classes. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* Mahasweta Devi showing her concern on the tribal life, their survival and their protest against the

exploitation made by the landowners and the moneylenders proves her liability as a writer to draw out the unwritten history of the subaltern so that it can not be vanished. As ecofeminism reveals women-nature connection, in this novel ecofeminist perspective becomes clear through Mahasweta Devi's urge of writing about the tribals, about their history, about their survival, their bondage with nature and their native culture of archery. Various kinds of movements are the origins of ecofeminism. "The women and life on earth : ecofeminism in the eighties" conference held at Amherst (1980) was the first ecofeminist conference to encourage the ecofeminist organizations and activities. Karen J. Warren says: "the living conditions of women, people of color, the poor, and children ... are an ecofeminist issue" (*Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* 12). In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* the living condition of tribal women, caste discrimination, poverty problem among the Mundas and the uncertain future of the tribal children are also an ecofeminist issue.

From the beginning of the novel it is very clear that the Mundas are very insecure in their land where they have no right to touch and see the precious goods and by chance if the precious goods come into their hands they are driven out from that area as Purti Munda remembers "how White men and Biharis jumped at the sight of coal and mica, how instantly they disfigured adivasi areas with slums of tile-roofed dwellings. Who knows what such people will do if they see gold? These hills, these forests, this river will once again be spoiled" (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 2). Mahasweta Devi states about the Mundas' consciousness of the ecological system that makes them to fight for planting *sal* and removing *sagun*. They know that *sal* has commercial value but *sagun* is ecologically worthy. Karen J. Warren states:

both deforestation and reforestation through the introduction of a monoculture species tree (e.g. eucalyptus) intended for commercial production are feminist issues because the



loss of indigenous forests and multiple species of trees has drastically affected rural Indian woman's ability to maintain a subsistence household (Karren Warren 127).

At the age of fourteen Chotti is sent to Parmi's father-in-law's house where he sees that the entire village is occupied by the other Bihari sects and castes "poor upper caste, rich upper-caste etc." (*Chotti Munda* 5). He also sees how the entire family goes to do bonded labour and he is prohibited to go to Dhani Munda. "I still say, when t' bow's in his hands, Munda societies and families are in danger" (*Chotti Munda* 5). The non-tribal impostors, being integrated as moneylenders, freelancers and agents provides credit service to the Mundas and the other low caste untouchables. This facility apparently brings relief among the Mundas but in reality it is very manipulative. The exploiters being assisted by the British acts not only exploit the tribal communities and untouchables but also they help the British to dislocate these people from their land. Actually the British needs to displace these people with the arrival of industries and making new projects. Thus they are underprivileged by the colonialism which snatching their traditional mode of survival bring them under the trap of revenue and landownership "...a strategy to situate the writing of a conquered people's history by conquerors at the very heart of the question of one nation's oppression by another" (*Dominance without Hegemony* xiii). The privilege, enjoyed by the elite class gives birth to the supremacy of modern capitalism, possessed a relation to the old feudal system. Ranajit Guha states:

...that subordination cannot be understood except as one of the constitutive terms in a binary relationship of which the other is dominance, for 'subaltern groups' are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up. (*Subaltern Studies* vii).

Mahasweta Devi shows here that it is not Lord Birsa's Ulgulan but Chotti Munda's spellbound arrow which signifies Chotti's opposing power against the moneylenders. As Joseph Pieper states:

Culture depends for its very existence on leisure, and leisure, in its turn, is not possible unless it has a durable and living link with the cultus, with divine worship... Culture... is the quintessence of all the natural goods of the world and of those gifts and qualities which, while belonging to man, lie beyond the immediate sphere of his needs and wants. (quoted in Karen J. Warren 160)

Chotti Munda's association with Dhani Munda brings another kind of story in Chotti's life that makes him a heroic figure in his village. Chotti is well aware of the facts of the tribal survival: "How the earth was made, how that earth was burnt in the fire of Shengelda, how a man and a woman survived, how a new earth was created..." (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 7). But the new epic which he comes to know from Dhani Munda about the Munda life happens twenty years ago. Mahasweta Devi shows here the inner sufferings of Dhani Munda who is compelled to be silent for the lives of the Mundas who will be tortured if he shows rage. The police tells Dhani not to go anywhere either his job will be lost. He tells Dhani further: "Yes I will not tease t' Munda people But e'en t' Gormen don 'want new torture and t' Munda roughed up" (*Chotti Munda* 6). Chotti Munda comes to know about the new torture that is related to bonded labour while at the time of harvest the entire family members of Parmi's father-in-law's house went to give bonded labour. Dhani cannot tolerate this kind of bondage for the Munda communities.

Where d'ye go? Dhani roared.
Bond labour!
Yes grandpa.



To gie bond labour? Dontcha Know? That bond labour is one among all th' ills he fought against?(*Chotti Munda* 6).

Dhani disgracefully says that the Munda communities here are the broken-backed and live on the kindness of Diku-Hindus. "As if in the unbearable pain of not being able to speak ,Dhani spoke, They know I'm t' Haramgod of archery. They think if I lift an arrer I'll call t' great revolt ---Ulgulan--- again" (*Chotti Munda* 8). Thus Dhani has been presented as a great rebel of stubborn spirit, an epithet of ground-breaking fortitude. His madness and tremendous hurriedness inside his heart lead him to many revolts:

Dhani was always crazy , at the time of the Santal Hul Dhani was a lad of twenty. The Kherwar revolt, the Mulkoil revolt of the Sardars, and then Birsa's revolt. Armed struggle is also an addiction. He went to all the revolts in the hope that Mundas would establish villages in forest and arable land and farm rightfully and in peace..." (*Chotti Munda* 11).

Mahasweta Devi says : "Archery was very much in their blood"(xi). She thinks Birsa Munda's resistance is continued through Chotti Munda's magic arrow that is handed over to him by Dhani Munda. This arrow becomes the weapon of their survival.Chotti not only takes the learning of archery from Dhani Munda but his soul is also ignited by Dhani's teachings. Dhani abuses Chotti that his interest only lies in winning Chotti fair and there is no progress or no struggle to change the Munda's life or "no piercin' of moneylender, polis, an' soldier with' arrests in t' heat of that fire, but there's t' chotti fair. Gormen babysits t' Munda tribe that way" (*Chotti Munda* 10). Parmi's father-in-law says that the Lalas or traders give them to plough the land as there produces no good crop. If they come to know anyway about the pepper they will take away. So they can do nothing in spite of their knowledge of growing pepper in this land. It is enough for them that

rice grows here. Mundas and the Oraons possess no land. "All t' land is Diku Land--- Hindu Land...."(*Chotti Munda* 11). Partha Chatterjee says, "The tension between a peasant community and an external exploitative force also becomes clear in the case of the operation of outside traders or moneylenders, particularly when they are racially or culturally distinct from peasantry" (*Subaltern Studies* 19). In the novel the representation of displacement, disproportion, casteism, famine, dispossession and humiliation is abounding. Here the wealthy and dominant landowners like Lala Bajinath and his son Tirathnath both lash out and humiliate the tribals by taking bonded labour from them. Lala Bajinath and the Daroga together forcefully push Bisra Munda towards death. He is compelled to hang himself as without any kind of fault he is bitterly beaten by the Daroga. Tirathnath thinks that to take the bonded labour from the Mundas and the untouchables is his natural duty. In time of drought when the Mundas and the untouchables go to Tirathnath to get some food, he orders his manager to give them the last year's maize which is full of bugs. But while they are able to understand the deception of Tirathnath ,Chotti gathering all the Mundas with bows and arrows loots the granaries of Tirathnath. The daroga does not do any kind of report regarding famine so that Tirathnath can take bonded labour from them. Janis Birkeland opines: "In Western Patriarchal culture masculine constructs and values have been internalized in our minds, embodied in our institutions, and played out in power-based social relations both in our daily lives and upon the world stage" (Greta Gaard 17). Another Munda named Dukhiya from kurmi village informs Chotti that he is a bond-slave of Nakata king's manager who not only tied him up with perpetual bondage but also his woman betrays him and marries to an another man. Dukhiya becomes unable to tolerate the abuses from the Manager and cutting him down hangs himself. As Frantz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth* draws out the psychological trauma of the



colonized people, Mahasweta Devi also demonstrates the psychological sufferings from drudgery and plight of the Mundas under the bonded labours of the landlords. In *The Post-colonial studies Reader* Jan Mohamed states: "Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture." (Abdul R. Jan Mohamed 18). Mahasweta Devi narrates:

It's as if Dukhia is drunk, drunk, as if he's free at last from the bond-slavery of his soul's thousand sorrows. His legs tremble a bit, he gives an innocent glance that holds a worldwide astonishment, and he says, Ye said he wouldn't badmouth no more. But then he comes to take his cut from t' market. I'm sittin' here with red pepper ---come to take his cut why does he move me hand with t' tip of his shoe? (*Chotti Munda* 54).

Dukhiya tells that nothing is deposited in his book in turn of the bonded labour which is started from his father's father and their entire generation is bounded by that. He says that they are to do various kinds of bonded labour. When the manager goes to the king's court, they take his palqin. The entire day is spoiled and neither food nor drink is given to them. Ania Loomba says:

The colonial contact is not just reflected in the language or imaginary of literary texts, it is not just backdrop or context against which human dramas are enacted, but a central aspect of what these texts have to say about identity, relationships and culture. (*Colonialism/Postcolonialism* 73)

In a similar way another Munda named Puran is exploited and oppressed by Tasilder Singh who smashes his house by placing elephant into it. Tasildar Singh after coming back from the king's hunt, a poisonous arrow pierces his back and he dies. Later it becomes clear that he is killed by Puran whose only purpose of learning archery is to stand against injustice. Janis Birkeland in her

essay "Ecofeminism: Linking theory and Practice" states that ecofeminism presents a proper understanding into the connection between the mistreatment of personal and political power which lie behind oppression of human beings and exploitation of environment. Mahasweta Devi along with subaltern humans also contributes picture of the subaltern nature in this novel. She demonstrates the tribal's sense of responsibility for nature. Offering Dhani Munda's ecological talent Mahasweta Devi shows how it leads towards a harmonious relationship between human beings and non-human nature. Taking Chotti into the forest Dhani called the jungle Our Mother and tells "Let me learn ye t' jungle. With jungle learning' ye won' die starvin' What isn't there in the jungle?" (*Chotti Munda* 11). The Mundas, being the original inhabitants always maintain the ancient pattern of settling. When a particular village or settlement becomes overpopulated, heads of the society find out another uninhabited place and assess its aptness in terms of soil, water and wind flows. If it appears favourable they drive a pole (Khunt) into the ground. The adjacent virgin forest will also be cleared to set up a village. Thus the Mundas' pattern of setting up a village becomes very healthy and pollution free as it is completely free from over population. Purti Munda's inside reconciliation with nature becomes clear while he opines if the white man and the Biharis come to be settled here "These hills, these forests, this river will once again be spoiled" (*Chotti Munda* 2). Again Dhani Munda's deep association with nature makes him oblige to shout on behalf of nature, on behalf of the forest. T'forest cried. Told him, Birsa, Diku-Master-White man ---together they've made me unclean, naked, undressed, clean me up. The adivasis' ecological knowledge and their skill are exploited by the landowning class. Thus the Mundas cannot cultivate pepper despite of its economic value as the landowners will snatch it away if they come to know.



Chaia Heller in her article “For the Love of Nature” says:

The ability to really know nature requires a continual process of critical self-consciousness. We are social creatures looking at the world through social eyes. In order to see nature, we must be increasingly conscious of our social desires and anxieties, our reluctance to relinquish power within society. If we are not conscious of our own greed, then we will see nature as a greedy force from which we must continually steal in order to survive....A metaphor that emerges within the language of a tribal people cannot be accurately translated into the language of an oppressive people. (*Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* 231)

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