

Ecological Consciousness in Tribal Myths: A Critique on Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

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Abstract: *The identity of tribals is distinguished by their ecocentric values in traditions and myths. For a long time, tribals' existence has pertained to nature which is well reflected in their myths. The eco-critical interpretations of various texts offer a revealing experience that how the relationship of man and nature has remained one of the essential elements of creative expressions in every culture of the world. As mythical heritage is an authentic source of understanding the tradition and cultural nuances of a particular community, novelists have effectively made use of mythical framework in order to explore the thought processes of people and their response to life which in turn are expressed in their creative writings. While dealing with indigenous life, Mahasweta Devi and Flora Nwapa have also captured the essence of mythical beliefs which are embedded in the tribals' traditional rituals and cultural expressions. In *The Book of the Hunter*, Mahasweta Devi has delved deep into the concept of nature, nurture, and sustainability present in the tribal myths in order to explore and depict their close affinity with the natural environment. Similarly, Flora Nwapa has also explored the ecological affinity manifested in the myths revolving around the cultural life of Igbo tribal community in her novel *Efuru*. This article employs an eco-critical approach to analyze *The Book of Hunter* and *Efuru* to underline the inspiring belief in traditional myths and rituals of the two communities namely, Shabar and Igbo, while investigating and analyzing the conscious efforts of tribals who endeavor to safeguard their natural abode against the onslaught of the Western concept of developed lifestyle. In fact, they derive their identity through the connection they share with nature and the symbiotic relationship is reflected in their rituals as well.*

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Ecocriticism, Ecological Consciousness, Mother Nature, Tribal Myths

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Yanrui Jin, a researcher on the depiction of Nature in Romantic literature, concludes "The emphasis on natural beauty in literature itself has also laid a foundation for the expansion of human ecological consciousness". A common aspect of myths is that the elements of nature play crucial role in the narrative plots. In most of the famous stories of Greek Mythology, the divine beings are often manifested in elements of nature. In the folklores of almost all communities, nature plays crucial roles in the lives of human beings. For instance, the myth of Goddess Artemis is associated with the natural world, and she is the protector of animals in the forest. Another story from Celtic Mythology has a mythical figure named 'Green Man' with similar characteristics. The Green Man is a manifestation of the ideas related to environmentalism underlining the importance of conservation of nature in man's life. It is observed from the day-to-day rituals followed by tribal people that myths have influenced the tribal lifestyle for ages. These myths have not only served the tribals to give them a particular identity but also have laid certain codes of conduct to be followed within the community. The presence of these myths, a part of cultural heritage, often shape the attitude and behavior of the whole community towards a better understanding of nature.

Tribal culture and social life are greatly influenced by the belief in myths and natural surroundings. It is this belief system which are reflected in their religious rituals and day-to-day lifestyle which has given them a distinct identity from the rest of the world. However, there was a drastic change noticed in the

lives of tribals was brought about by industrialization, colonialism and globalization. The fast-changing world view has had a deep effect on the cultures of tribal communities. The tribal people struggled deeply as they got stranded between the opposite pulls of modernity and traditional beliefs. The Western concept of growth and development attached a kind of stigma to their belief system and cultural practices which often led to a feeling of being segregated from the mainstream and leading a marginalized existence. The social scientists have observed a gradual wiping out of rituals and myths from their culture and belief system. There are alarming signs of degradation in tribal lifestyle as a consequence of the tendency to prefer, directly or indirectly, the urban way of life.

Mahasweta Devi, a prolific writer from Kolkata, and Flora Nwapa, a Nigerian author took up to highlight the issues of oppression of *adivasi* or tribal people in their writings. These two writers have lucidly brought to the literary forefront the plight of tribal communities during the phase of transition from traditional to modernity. They have also manifested the role of myths in tribal life in their literary oeuvre. Their writings have raised concern for the conservation of nature as well as the identity of tribals. Many other writers have also pointed out the exploitation of local tribals in the course of unmindful destruction of natural ambiance. The situation of concern warranted an active participation of all sections of intelligentsia including creative writers and literary critics. A concerted effort resulted into re-reading classical literary texts, besides creating texts, with a focus on the environmental context of the plot in order to underline the importance of a healthy ecosystem. The eco-critical approach in appreciating a literary text consciously aims at inculcating an environmental consciousness in the readers, thereby, influencing the attitudes of human beings toward nature. The present research paper is an attempt to explore the way Devi's *The Book of the Hunter* and Nwapa's *Efuru* focus on depicting that how the life of indigenous people and nature is symbiotic in nature. Both of these postcolonial authors have done a fantastic job of capturing the mystic beliefs of tribal communities that enabled them to coexist peacefully with the forest. The mythological stories dealing with the mystical operations of the natural world have created a sense of responsibility to preserve their natural habitat.

According to Yanrui Jin, though British literature has suffered the abhorrence of industrialization they still had a closer affinity towards ecology, as nature was used as objective correlative for diverse emotional situations. However, there is a completely different scenario in the literary productions of the colonized people. The narratives elaborated the timeline of colonialism to post-colonialism and neo-colonialism. The thematic concerns included as to what the colonies like India and Africa went through the phase of colonization which marked the beginning of the dark effects of industrialization. These countries were not only a sanctuary for indigenous people but were also a storehouse of natural resources. It automatically attracted the local industrialists for making it a hub for expanding development schemes for selfish material gains in the garb of progress and employment generation for the local inhabitants. In the face of suppression, exploitation, subjugation, displacement, and ensuing inevitable tussle between the government and non-tribal people, writers like Mahasweta Devi and Flora Nwapa gave voice to muffled tribal identities through their literary endeavors.

Literary works of authors like Devi and Nwapa are embedded with instances of myths and rituals being an integral part of tribal cultural life which shaped the tribal community's symbiotic relationship with nature. However, incessant interference into the lives of tribal communities by the agents of so-called development, especially during the colonial rule, drastically disturbed the balance between human beings and nature. Natural environment started degrading and human communities were faced with existential issues due to mass scale displacements. The existing problem of environmental degradation and its depiction in literary narratives gave rise to a new literary theory that was concerned with ecocentric issues in literature. Arne Naess was the first critic to introduce the concept of deep ecology, in her work titled *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary* (1973). According to Naess, this theory cultivates ecological consciousness among readers. It also promotes the need to conserve the

degrading biosphere. Later, a new movement called the Deep Ecological Movement was promoted by philosophers like Arne Naess, Bill Devall, and George Sessions. They believed that human beings and nature should be treated as one and both should stay in unity and must co-exist.

Devi in her work, *The Book of the Hunter*, narrates how the life of tribal people belonging to the Shabar community was intertwined with nature. It is observed that decades before the government initiatives taken for Sustainable Development goals, the cultural heritage of the “Shabar” community disseminated traditions and customs related to the conservation of environment. These socio-cultural traditions and customs set them apart from the rest of the world. The novel narrates the simple life led by the Shabar tribe based in West Bengal. The plot unravels itself amid the forest dwellers and their Goddess named Abhyachandi, the embodiment of nature who is known to give protection to people. The kind of relationship shared between the goddess and the shabar community is exemplary of sustainability and consciousness towards nature. Like several other works of Devi, this novel illustrates the undoing of tribal lifestyle of the Shabar community in the name of development. The writer has meticulously juxtaposed the experiences of a non-tribal character named Mukunda and tribal characters, Danko Shabar, his grandson Kayla and Kayla’s wife named Phuli. Through the depiction of these binary characters Devi shows that how life can be lived happily even with limited resources. For instance, tribals like Kayla and Phuli lived a happy complacent life. They had nothing in terms of modern standardized living but had everything in the lap of Mother Nature.

The Shabar community was far more advanced in terms of sustainability until the Britishers came and branded them as criminals for no reason. Their predicament and displacement from their place of origin are powerfully depicted by Devi in this novel. In the preface, Devi acknowledges the work *Abhyamangal* and *Byadhkhanda* of a Bengali poet named Mukundaram Chakrabarti. Many parts of the novel are inspired by these two works. The narrative begins with the depiction of Mukundaram who was gifted with poetic skills. He along with his wife and children migrated from their village Daminya after his mother’s demise. The theme of migration is evident in places where the quality of sustenance has degraded. Mukunda with his family migrated in search of a good life.

Devi has lucidly juxtaposed the non-tribal character Mukundaram along with other tribal characters like Danko Shabar, Kayla, and Phuli to bring out the difference in lifestyle. The purpose of migration of both tribal and non-tribal characters exhibits different motifs; Mukundaram migrates for better life and opportunities whereas the people of the Shabar community are displaced from their native land as the government encroaches on their abode for developmental projects. Mukundaram arrives at a place called Ararha where he meets Kayla and Phuli who belong to the Shabar tribe. He is easily fascinated by the frugal living style of the couple. For a long time, Mukundaram’s poetic abilities lay dormant due to absence of any inspiration. But on meeting this Shabar couple he finds his muse for writing. He is intrigued by the simple life of the Shabar community who never cared for any extravagance and meticulously followed their religious rituals. Kayla informs him that the community is mandated to follow the strict code of conduct believed to be framed by the mythical figure named Abhyachandi, the Forest Goddess. Kayla admits nonchalantly:

The Shabars are residents of the forest; they live at the edge of town! They don't know what money is, nor do they see much of it..... We don't understand money. (Devi 117)

Unlike the contemporary practice of measuring status and development in monetary terms, the Shabar tribe saw progress within the forest. Their minimalistic way of life and strong conviction to myths made them set apart from the world. The forest for this Shabar community was an oasis of all riches in the form of natural resources which they used in judicious manner. They believed that the mother Abhayachandi, would fulfil all the needs of the people. This mythical belief is expressed by Kayla’s mother Tejota:

Some call her Abhayachandi, and others call her a desolate forest.... She gives us fruits, flowers, tubers, leaves, wood, honey, resin, medicine herbs, barks, leaves and roots, and even animals to hunt, She gives us everything, and keeps us alive – doesn't that make her our mother? (Devi 73)

The incidents of the novel intrinsically manifest the concept of ecological consciousness and sustainability. The above excerpt shows how the Shabar community was gifted with all the necessities within the dwelling forest. Their conviction to the myth of Abhyachandi had not only made the people responsible but also dutiful towards the environment. They were aware of the severe consequences if they didn't protect nature. This obligated feeling towards nature was not out of consciousness but was due to fear which was instigated by myth. The Shabar community feared that some tragedy would befall them if they failed to abide by the conduct laid in the myth. The belief indirectly triggered their ecological consciousness and inspired them to live in harmony with the biosphere.

The community was already leading their lives as Bill Devall would be propounding in his concept of a Biocentric Egalitarian society, where all living organisms, biosphere, and human beings are interconnected with each other and are identified as one. (Luke) The ceremonies like marriage rituals and hunting also strongly hinted at the idea of ecological consciousness and sustainability. In one of the conversations between Kayla and Mukunda, Kayla tells how their means of livelihood is dependent on hunting which they did benevolently.

He refers to an incident that how during one of their hunting expeditions when they were trying to hunt an old elephant who entered the Abhyachandi temple area, Danko Shabar, the oldest of all the people halted the act of hunting immediately asserting that the goddess's will is not to harm the elephant. Another incident is that of putting a restriction on the size of dowry, it was customary that during the marriage ceremony, only five deer skins and one or two boars will be accepted as dowry by girls' families. That is, the ceremonial rituals and rules of hunting indicated a conscious effort made by the Shabar to keep a balance in the biosphere. They were lavished with all the requirements in the lap of nature which they regulated according to their needs. That is, the notion of neither more nor less was already in practice which is one of the founding precepts of Sustainable Development Goals in the world facing the consequences of acute ecological imbalance.

The ecological consciousness of the community is clearly reinforced through myths. Danko Shabar, the oldest man of the community was accepted as the leader of the Shabars. He was considered as the protector of religious and social codes within the community. His duty was to remind the people about the tenets laid by the goddess Abhayachandi. Danko himself promoted balance in the ecosystem. He had a close affinity for creatures living in the forest which is illustrated in his day-to-day activities like providing loving care to a python residing in the forest, digging many small reservoirs in and around the forest area to capture the rainwater for animals to drink. The relationship of human beings and forest was of a symbiotic nature, with the forest playing a crucial role in providing the Shabars with shelter and food. Toyota, one of the oldest members of the Shabar community, was said to be gifted with knowledge about medicinal plants and used herbs from the forest to treat common ailments. Her inherent knowledge of the need of sustainable use of natural resources and ecological balance for survival is well articulated in these words:

Look at the kingdom of animals and birds! When a tiger is hungry, it kills a deer; an elephant eats leaves and twigs from the bamboo and the banyan tree but there is no needless killing, violence, and destruction. (Devi 100)

The second part of the narrative explores the conscious efforts of Shabars to protect nature because of their belief in myths. It elaborates on how the intervention of the king of Daminya disrupted the simple life of the community. Due to land encroachment and overuse of natural resources in the name of infrastructural development, the natural environment was disturbed, and the life of Shabar was at risk.

During this time Bemo Shabar was the chief of the community. The king's declaration to urbanize Ararha extended to the forest of Shabars. Bemo Shabar tried to oppose the King's idea of infrastructural development. He suggested stopping the use of furnace bricks to build houses as the furnace was causing pollution which was causing adverse effects on the environment. He insisted on making houses with unfurnished bricks. However, his suggestions were ignored, and the Shabars were dislocated from their ancestral home.

In the third part of the novel, the author has depicted the consequences of the modern concept of development. The coming up of the township greatly affected the tribal people of the Shabar community. The degradation of forests and displacement of people led to despair and a sense of loss of identity which are reflected in Tejota's conversation when she says that a Shabar is corrupted if he stays near the town or city. She feared that as the forest disappeared, the community would also disappear by losing its ethnicity. As most of the displaced Shabars would move to cities and adopt the town culture, characters like Danko Shabar and Tejota are seen to be questioning the Western concept of development based on unsustainable exploitation of natural resources in the name of progress.

Mahasweta Devi has given expression to the cultural awareness in the tribal community of India regarding the importance of ecological balance. Flora Nwapa also has depicted the ingrained ecological consciousness through mythical beliefs among the Igbo tribes residing in parts of Nigeria in her novel *Efuru*. The novel has a mythological fervour in its narrative style itself. Nwapa has portrayed Uhamiri, the goddess of Fertility, in a manner reminiscent of Devi's characterization of the goddess Abhyachandi. Goddess Uhamiri bears the same responsibilities for protecting the Igbo community as those of Abhayachandi for the Shabar community. The narrative also explores Efuru, the protagonist's journey in the post-colonial patriarchal society. Efuru was raised to be rebellious and is presented with a variety of opportunities as she matures and enters into a married life. The novel opens with her rejecting the dowry system and marrying against his father Nwashike Ogene's wishes. In her union with Adizua, she is happy and contented as her husband is able to provide for the basics of life despite his terrible economic situation. Efuru's happiness is cut short, though, in the midst of the narrative, when Adizua gives in to alcoholism and abandons his wife and daughter, Ogonim. Subsequently, the daughter passes away from a serious illness, leaving Efuru by herself. The protagonist of the novel explores her identity and place in the patriarchal society in a bildungsroman-style narrative. The traditional roles of women, such as those of wife and mother, have been eloquently presented in the first section of the narrative which was also aspired to by Efuru all along her life. But her expectations from life were altered following her daughter's untimely death. Suffering from the pangs of the feeling of being childless, Efuru adopts Ogea, a girl who helps with household chores and takes care of Efuru's father.

However, Efuru's life undergoes a drastic upheaval as she finds out that just like her mother, she has been selected as the worshipper of the lake goddess Uhamiri. The mythological deity Uhamiri is revered by the Igbo people. She goes by several names, including Mammy Water, the goddess of fertility, and the lake goddess. Nwapa describes Uhamiri as:

... an omnipresent god who directs the affairs of man. She is endowed with enormous mysterious supernatural powers. (Nwapa 56)

Unlike Abhayachandi, an entirely different viewpoint on ecology can be seen in the ways that the mythological goddess Uhamiri operates. Uhamiri rules the Igbo community in a rather strict manner. The members of the community have obligations not only to their own reproductive choices but also to the businesses that support economic expansion. In fact, the novel illustrates in detail as to how a mythological goddess controls human behavior in such a manner that ecological balance is maintained with a spiritual fervour.

Deep ecologists like Bill Devall and George Sessions believe that the only way to preserve ecological balance and achieve sustainable development is through population checks. (Luke) The believers of this environmental philosophy put stress on the importance of Nature for its own sake and not in terms of its utility for human existence. Population of any community reflects human behavioral pattern and population growth is directly proportional to over-exploitation of natural resources. As ecological consciousness calls for the healthiest possible preservation and restoration of both human and non-human forms of life in the environment, it becomes crucial for communities to take action to curb population growth because it has a direct impact on environmental degradation. In *Efuru*, Nwapa underlines the potential for customs centered on Uhamiri worship to subtly instill ecological consciousness as cultural values among the community members. For instance, though revered as the goddess of fertility, Uhamiri commands her followers to stay virgins. After deciding to worship the goddess, Efuru found herself in a difficult situation because she could not reconcile her desire to have children while adhering to the rigorous rituals required to worship the goddess of the lake. One of the incidents in the book describes how Efuru was forbidden from sharing a bed with her husband during the Orie days. She had conflicting roles in her marriage and religion. Wilentz comments on her contradictory roles:

Her place as priestess of Uhamiri gives her great strength and power, yet it stops her from totally fulfilling her role as a woman in Igbo society. In the same way, the traditional culture gives women strength yet traditions limit their roles. (Wilentz 16)

The goddess also regulated economic activity which had the potential to affect the ecological equilibrium. For instance, Efuru describes her dreams about the goddess, and the following day, she experiences a barrage of blessings and miracles at work. She relates how, each time she goes trading in the town and has a dream about Goddess Uhamiri, the debtor pays her back on their own. Certain days were marked in the name of Goddess when the people abstained themselves from over consuming natural resources.

Goddess Uhamiri is also the goddess of wealth and people are in awe of her prowess. Enesha Agorua, Efuru's father's friend is found to be warning fellow human beings to beware of the Goddess even for worldly success:

... you must keep her laws. Look around this town, all the three-story buildings you find are built by women who one time or another have been worshippers of Uhamiri. (Nwapa 192)

Though Efuru was blessed with wealth and business success, she was barred from having children. Throughout her life, she has been portrayed as a character that has been submissive to her husband, society, and community rituals. Her individuality and identity waned as a being as she was suppressed and controlled by patriarchal norms and a mythical goddess named Uhamiri. Unlike Abhayachandi in *The Book of the Hunter*, Uhamiri is portrayed as a goddess who does oversee the Igbo community's affairs but is also being viewed as a victimizer who repressed her worshippers' desires. Enesha Agorua speaks with Efuru regarding the traditions to be observed when honoring the lake goddess. Enesha says:

Uhamiri is a great woman. She is our goddess... very kind to woman. If you are to worship her, you must keep her taboo. Orie Day is her great day. You are not to fish on this day... You are not to sleep with your husband ... When you feel particularly happy, and grateful, you should sacrifice a white sheep to her. Above all, you will keep yourself holy. (Nwapa 192)

There is a subtle parallel in the way these mythological, godlike figures embody Nature. As a lake goddess, Uhamiri is in charge of fertility in terms of both beauty and wealth. In addition, she regulates the people's financial matters as well. For instance, Orie Day is set aside as a day of worship and the members of the Igbo community and followers of Uhamiri are forbidden to do fishing or eat yams on this specific day. People scrupulously adhered to the tradition of not fishing on Orie days out of fear of the goddess's wrath. The strong fear of "wrath" on the subjects illustrates how the Shabars and Igbo tribal communities were governed by their mythical beliefs. The inter-connection of mythology and religious faith instilled

fear in their minds regarding the severe consequences of supernatural anger, which indirectly contributed towards the preservation the natural equilibrium of the surrounding ecosystem as a cultural value of the community. Having inherited a strict cultural conscience, the Shabar community ceased hunting whenever an animal entered the altar of Abhayachandi, and the Igbo community abstained from fishing on Orié days.

The taboos of the myths that have been perpetuated over the ages reflect an ecological consciousness that is implied through the rituals which are practiced by the community. These successfully inculcated an element of discipline in the people by making them aware of their surroundings in terms of Nature to be revered and so refrain from the rapacious exploitation of natural resources. Jin's observation on ecological consciousness appropriately closes this section on tribal mythology. He writes:

Ecological consciousness is a special value concept, which is based on the mutual relationship between all ecology and human activities in nature, including itself. (Jin 1)

Devi and Nwapa highlight the existence of ecological consciousness among the tribal population created through their cultural heritage. In fact, the mythologies of all ancient cultures categorically highlight the importance of Nature for the living beings of the earth. The elements of Nature, whether living or non-living, are granted an independent place of importance and respect for its own sake and not as a resource to be utilized by human beings. The characters like, Tejota, Danko Shabar, Bemo Shabar, and Efurú etc. and several incidents in the selected novels show the ways in which mythology has truly awakened tribal people's consciousness. The novels are reiterations that the Western concept of development through over-exploitation have proved itself to be self-destructive for human beings and perhaps the human community needs to look back and accept that man is not the master of the universe, instead being gifted with the intellectual capacity should devise ways to not only conserve physical environment but work actively towards symbiotic and meaningful coexistence of all elements of Nature of which man is just a minuscule component. Postcolonial writers like Mahasweta Devi and Nwapa urge people to preserve and restore the declining biosphere through the perspectives of the Shabar and Igbo communities. The fact that tribal people are the only people have lived in nature actively following their mythical beliefs, which either directly or indirectly preserve the tribe's cultural roots and identity. Appreciating such novels with an ecocritical perspective definitely invites the young generation to look at our cultural heritage with a positive attitude and discover significant meaning in this age of information which has already started reeling under the effects of climate change consequent upon man's pride on their innovative skills and a false sense of superiority over other components of the universe.

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