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**MIRRORING NATURE THROUGH THE OPPRESSED IN  
MAHASWETA DEVI'S "KUNTI AND THE NISHADIN" AND  
"BREAST-GIVER"**

Ankita Hait

Department of English, Jyoti Nivas College (Autonomous), Bangalore, India

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**Abstract:** Nature has been a recurrent theme, symbol, protagonist in literary works across culture and space. From Wordsworth to Tagore, writers, poets, scholars across time have looked up to Nature as a source of inspiration that has guided them throughout time. Writers across space has written and criticised this exploitative nature of mankind and has empathised with Nature. The indigenous of any community shares a deeper and much more significant relationship with the land even today. Mahasweta Devi's short stories bring out the very essence of indigenous people and their relation with Nature which is more meaningful as opposed to the relationship between urban man and Nature. The short stories showcase the oneness that the indigenous people feel with their Nature and how they create their own identity around it.

**Keywords:** Nature, oppressed, ecocriticism, women, exploitation

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The last few centuries have seen a growing trend in literary studies where literature intersects and comes in confluence with multiple other disciplines and gives an interdisciplinary view to texts.

In the late 1980s in US and early 1990s in UK there was yet another movement in its 'emergent' stage. 'Ecocriticism' or 'green studies' as Glotfelty comments in her essay *The Ecocriticism Reader (1996)* is:

...the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (Glotfelty, Introduction xviii)

Ecocriticism is often seen entwined with feminism where critics parallel the exploitation of Nature with the exploitation of woman in a hegemonic, patriarchal framework. Thus the woman becomes Nature who is exploited in the hands of the man for his own selfish motives. Another branch of ecocriticism puts forth a perspective where the indigenous of one particular society becomes the true representation of the Natural world but the mainstream societies marginalise and silence them. The focus of ecocriticism is to celebrate the true symbiotic relationship of an individual with Nature. This paper attempts to understand the mirroring of Nature through the oppressed in Mahasweta Devi's selected short stories.

Literature which is usually born out of a specific social and political context has always raised and acknowledged the concern regarding Nature and has urged its readers to rethink about the disastrous consequences that follows their thoughtless actions. Mahasweta Devi, a prominent writer in Bengali and an activist has written innumerable pieces where she explores the lives of the tribal people of West Bengal and Bihar and their close kinship with Nature as opposed to the city space where human beings have commercialised Nature. Mahasweta Devi's short story "Kunti and the Nishadin" (Kunti O Nishadin in Bengali) was

published in an anthology of short stories called *After Kurukshetra*. The short story “Kunti and the Nishadin” is a fictional confrontation between Kunti and the Nishadin in the forest. The story begins in the Ashram Vashik Parv of the Mahabharata where Kunti along with Dhritarashtra and Gandhari departs for vanaprastha.

Through the story Mahasweta Devi juxtaposes two completely different lifestyles: *rajjavritta* or the life in the city through Kunti and the soul of the Nature, the *lokavritta* through the Nishadin. The Nishadin in the story not only stands as the representation of Mother Earth but also embodies the true values that constitute human nature. The narrative seems to primarily focus on the retrospection of Kunti and her life in the palace as a Queen, as a Mother but it is only towards the end of the narrative that we come across the confrontation between Kunti and the Nishadin where truths are revealed.

The Nishadin stands as a representative of all the indigenous people who are often erased and go unrecognised by the mainstream. Kunti being the representation of the upper, elite and the privileged section of the society is not only dismissive about the tribal communities but at the same time she reduces them to “mute rocks”, “trees” and “animals”. Even though Kunti tries to create a sense of oneness with nature, the deep seated biases and hypocrisy in her fails to acknowledge the very existence of these communities within the forest. She undermines the relationship that the indigenous people shared with Nature. Through the Nishadin, Mahasweta Devi subverts the false ideologies that the mainstream holds onto and creates themselves as superior than the others. The Nishadin questions the very foundation of the “dharmayudh” where men mercilessly killed their own family members. Love, protection, care which is basic human nature is seen to have lost its value and has been substituted by vengeance, hatred and violence. The text showcases the decline of man from his high moral grounds as he keeps

moving away from Nature. It is only in close proximity with Nature that one finds ones true self and can preserve the exclusive qualities that contribute in becoming true a human being.

The Nishadin in her confrontation reveals that Kunti in her selfish motive to save her sons cold bloodedly murdered five Nishads and their mother in the wax palace for which she can never be forgiven. Kunti's act of murdering the family shows the nature of the larger society where killing, murdering; plundering is committed keeping in mind one's own self interest. The narrative emphasises that while Kunti has accepted that giving Karna away was her biggest mistake, she fails to even recollect and recognise her act of committing the murder as a crime. Laws are manmade and in Nature the laws of man don't work. In Nature everyone is treated equally and thus the story ends with the forest fire which is a way of Nature to punish Kunti for her crimes. The Nishadin emphasises that it is not by class or caste that one constructs oneself as great but it is only through the deeds (karma) that one performs that determines ones position in the society. The Nishadin not only challenges but subverts the ideologies and discourses that Kunti wove against them and shows the persisting hollowness in Kunti who as a human being is much lower than the Nishadin in the eyes of Mother Nature. Nishadin herself becomes the voice of Nature who shares and celebrates the laws of Nature and does not abide by the man made laws which are narrow, stringent and are made to oppress and exploit another group.

While Kunti and the Nishadin juxtaposed the two different lives and lifestyles, "Breast-Giver" (Stanadayini, in Bengali) showcases the exploitation and hypocrisy that lies within the so called Brahminical caste. In the short story Jashoda is a "mother by profession" who nurtures and rears almost fifty children by feeding them her breast milk. Economically impoverished, with an invalid husband, Jashoda becomes the bread winner of her family. While feminism

talks about a rising awareness of sisterhood among women to resist patriarchy, here in the story it is the women who become the faces of oppression for Jashoda. Jashoda, is not only a woman who undergoes untold exploitation but at the same time she represents Nature which is subjected to exploitation equally by men and women to fulfil their own selfish motives. Here, Jashoda is used as a commodity which has a value and as soon as she is exhausted she is immediately discarded without a second thought. The narrative alludes to Jashoda as the spirit of Nature who nurtures, who is bountiful, who offers plenitude but while in return she was to get replenished, she got discarded by all. In one instance Jashoda says- “does it hurt a tree to bear fruits?” In another instance after her husband’s accident the narrative states- “She wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest.” The narrative clearly equates Jashoda to Nature who unconditionally replenishes mankind with her “harvest.” Not only is Jashoda compared to nature she is also compared to “holy cow” or the “Cow of Fulfilment” which alludes to the mythical cow that Rishi Vashistha possessed who could grant any wish and demand. Similarly, Jashoda fulfils the demand of nourishment of the children. Her milk becomes the commodity which she sells in order to earn a living.

Not only did she become a mother figure for all the children she fed but here she also nestled motherly affection for her own husband. Nature is seen as feminine and the man, the coloniser who controls the land, rapes it, tames it to make it his. Similarly, when Kanganicharan faces with an accident her motherly instincts overpower her. Here though the man exploits and uses her, she feels for the man and nurtures him. Jashoda like the mythical Jashoda, the mother of Lord Krishna soon became a god like figure who had a “flood of milk” to feed every hungry child. But as time changed so did her position. By the ending we find her homeless and once taken shelter in her former employer’s house she is reduced to a cook. And when she was diagnosed with cancer she was immediately discarded by her family as well as the employer’s

family. This explores how man exploits and ruins nature to an extent which can never be replenished over time. The death of Jashoda at the end shows the inevitable result of man and his action.

The story not only explores the exploitation of Nature through Jashoda, but at the same time also shows how the female body is objectified and is seen as a commodity by the society at large. The story also shows the power hierarchies and marginalisation within a particular class. While Nishadin was doubly marginalised, Jashoda though not doubly marginalised her exploitation is no less. The two short stories explore the complex relationship between man and nature and the growing materialism that dominates this relationship. While Jashoda becomes Nature herself even though she is not an indigenous, similarly the Nishadin shows the pure, untainted relationship of the indigenous people with nature.

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